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Tsukushi

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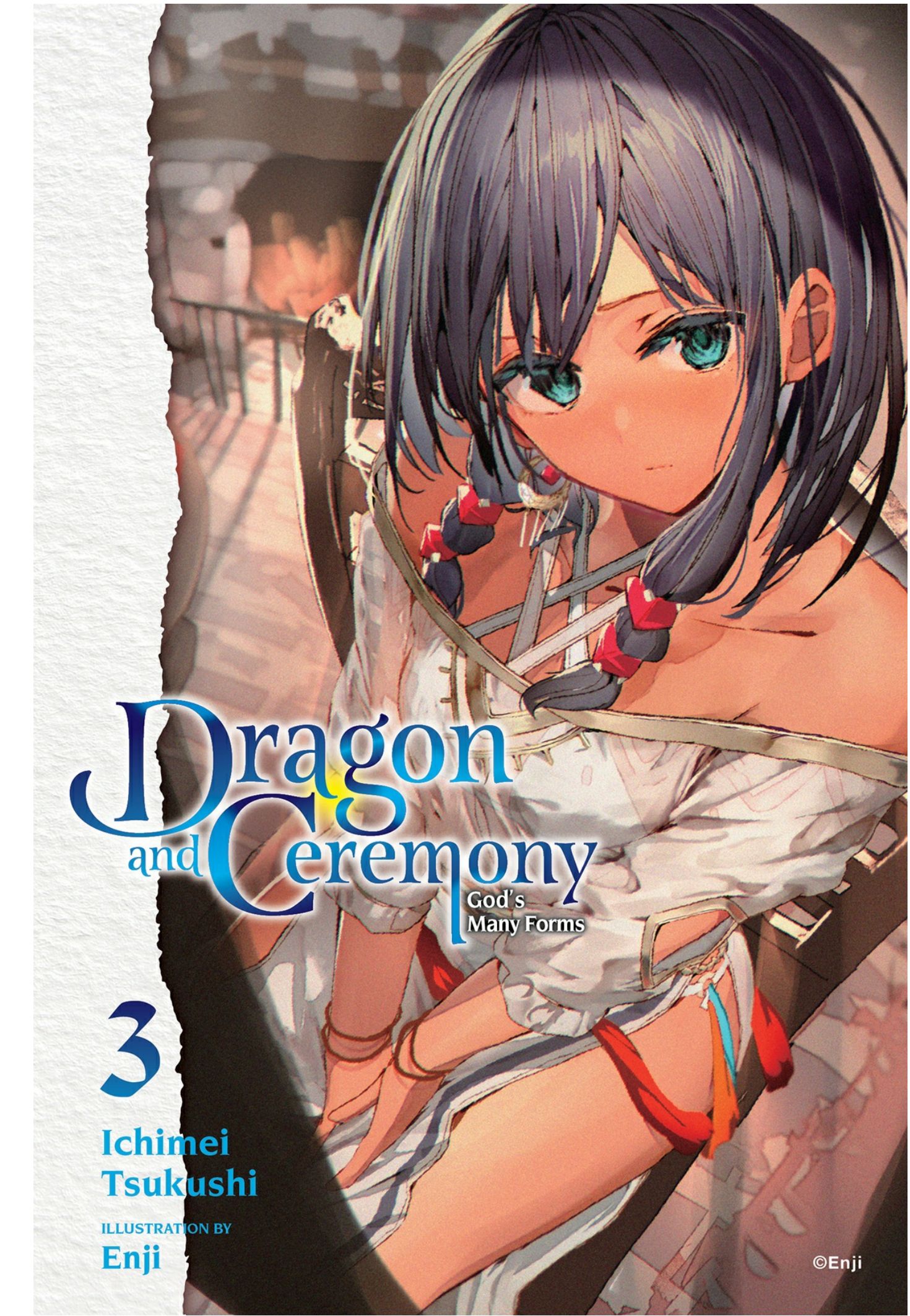
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Dragon and Ceremony

God's
Many Forms







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C O N T E N T S

PROLOGUE

CHAPTER 1 **As Quiet as Snow**

CHAPTER 2 **And Shamelessly Kind**

CHAPTER 3 **Or Coldly Peaceful**

CHAPTER 4 **To Someday Melt
and Fade**

EPILOGUE

D R A G O N A N D C E R E M O N Y

Presented by Ichimei Tsukushi





!
Ix
Apprentice wandmaker.
!

!
Yuui
Girl with the dragon wand.
!

Dragon and Ceremony

God's
Many Forms

3

Ichimei Tsukushi

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DRAGON AND CEREMONY

ICHIMEI TSUKUSHI

Translation by Jordan Taylor

Cover art by Enji

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PROLOGUE

In a town near the eastern border of the kingdom, a girl waited. The town was called Estosha, and the girl was called Riess. Ix was familiar with the village, but this was his first time meeting her. But somehow, she'd known his name.

Cloaked in the cold air, everything in the area lost its color, as though it were the backdrop to a dream. Winter was always like this. People would hole themselves up in their homes, and sleep would descend upon the town. Just about everything would come to a stop as the snowflakes flitted through the air. It would stay that way until the snow melted.

There weren't any passengers in the carriage besides Ix. The depressed-looking coachman told him it would be the last journey of the year as he handed him his luggage.

As Ix disembarked into the station, which was already shutting down for the end of the year, he saw someone sitting in a chair by the wall. Her back was perfectly straight, and her eyes were glassy and vacant. Her soft, light-colored hair stood out against her navy-blue clothing. As he moved closer, she turned to face him. This was Riess.

"Welcome to the City of God," she said in a tone that hardly suited a child not even ten years old.

"The City of God?" he asked back, his head tilted.

"Yes. Our community is closest to God."

"Sorry, I don't know much about Marayism."

"This is your first time visiting, right?" She trained her unfocused eyes on him. "Coming here is every wand craftsman's dream."

"I'm no craftsman, just an apprentice."

"But you came here to make wands."

"That's true, but..."

“Then you must know about the legend of Rednoff. Did you bring your Declaration of Equivalency?” Riess tilted her head slightly before clasping her hands in front of her chest. “Never mind. I’m sorry. I just wanted to talk to you a bit. I’ll show you the way. Would you mind chatting while we walk?”

“There was a map included with the letter. I can go alone.”

“But you’ll get lost on your own. This town is very complicated. The other person got here a long time ago, so I’d feel bad making them wait in the cold.”

“Aren’t you chilly, Riess?”

Though the girl was wearing a few layers, she didn’t have a coat on. Ix wondered if the frigid winds blowing through here every now and then were too much for her.

“Yeah. I’m not feeling so good, either,” she said, narrowing her eyes as if from a bright light, despite the fact that the sky was still covered behind a layer of gray clouds. “Can I get in your coat?”

The girl didn’t wait for a response before she moved toward him, wrapped the bottom flaps of his coat around herself, and disappeared beneath them.

Thinking it would be a pain to resist now, Ix didn’t protest when she told him to move, though it was tricky adjusting his stride to hers.

Estosha’s streets were just as complex as Riess had claimed. The roads twisted and curved, so you couldn’t tell where they led. Ix would have ended up walking in circles had he gone off alone.

“It’s like this because we’re close to the border,” Riess told him. “They built the city this way on purpose, to confuse invaders if they get inside.”

“What’s the point of making it so bewildering? They should strengthen the outer defenses instead,” replied Ix.

“They couldn’t improve the ramparts or the wand wall any more than they already had, so they turned to the interior. Besides, people get used to things being a little messy. No one who lives here gets lost.”

“Have you ever been invaded?”

“Thankfully, no one’s made it inside.” Ix could feel her shaking her head under

his jacket. “But what’s aboveground doesn’t matter. The heart of defense is below.”

“Below?” She must have meant underground.

“I doubt anyone remembers, but that’s how it was originally.”

Ix couldn’t help glancing at the pavement, but it was solidly built and didn’t look like it was in danger of collapsing anytime soon.

Riess had told him she wanted to talk, but it seemed like she was more interested in telling him idle gossip than asking him anything. The few people who passed them on the street gave Ix suspicious looks as he addressed his coat.

“Thinking about it,” started Ix, suddenly realizing something and taking his turn to speak, “you mentioned another person earlier. Does that mean they only called two people?”

“No, there are three in total, including you. I said *‘the other person’* because they’re the other apprentice,” she replied evenly. “They should have a Declaration of Equivalency, too.”

In accordance with kingdom law, only those who achieved the title of craftsman were permitted to make wands. However, it wasn’t realistic for this limited number of people to churn out every single wand, which was why shops off-loaded some of the work onto apprentices. This was allowed because a wand created under the supervision of a craftsman was considered the same as having been crafted by the craftsman themselves.

There were a few rare instances, however, when apprentices would carry something called a Declaration of Equivalency to make wands outside of their instructor’s shop. It was a letter stating that the craftsman and apprentice were one and the same. That being said, these declarations were few and far between because they made the craftsman liable for whomever they gave them to. In practice, they were used in only the rarest of circumstances, such as grave emergencies or as a means of testing apprentices looking to become independent.

“There’ll be one craftsman and two apprentices? Hope it goes well...,”

murmured Ix.

“Your master must have been busy,” said Riess.

“No, she’s just the worst shut-in you’ve ever seen. And she’s not my master; she just studied under the same teacher I did. I also don’t have any plans to go independent.”

“So she really trusts you?”

“No...,” Ix responded. He thought back to Morna as she’d scribbled out the declaration. “I imagine she just didn’t put much thought into it. Or she didn’t want to go outside. Could be both.”

The person who’d gotten here before him was probably close to going independent. Ix, on the other hand, would have nowhere to go if he set off by himself, and he didn’t have the funds to start a shop. He was lacking on all fronts. And without a store of his own, he wouldn’t be allowed to work independently.

There came the sudden ringing of bells.

The high-pitched sound rang out multiple times, echoing throughout the town. It was so loud that, for a moment, it was all Ix could hear. Oddly, though, it didn’t grate on his ears. Looking in the direction of the noise, he saw a bell tower peeking out from among the houses.

“That’s Estosha Chapel,” stated Riess. “And that was the noon bell. You’re just passing through now, but you should take a look inside when you have time. It vies for the position of first-or second-most historical building in the kingdom.”

“First or second?”

“Something about that interest you?”

“I heard the same thing said about the capital’s cathedral.”

“Exactly. It’s vying with the capital’s cathedral.”

Maybe it was just because the town was so old, but it seemed like Riess had a new tale or historical fact to rattle off every time they turned a corner. Her stories ranged from what sounded like real history to entirely unfounded rumor.

“But...,” said Ix, tilting his head. They were passing through a square where a knight had supposedly ended his hundred-person killing spree by slaying his lover. “You’re telling me way too many things for this trip to be accidental.”

“Maybe.”

“Did you intentionally take me this way?”

“It was just a little detour,” she said, unconcerned. “I’m sorry. I just wanted to walk with you a bit, even though I knew it would cause you trouble.”

“And what about the other person who arrived earlier?”

“I’ll apologize. But I suspect they’ll be forgiving. I am a child, after all.”

“Not if you put it like that, they won’t.”

“You think? If that happens, you can cover for me,” Riess said lightly. Ix couldn’t tell if she was joking or not. “All right, now I’ll tell you what I’ve been saving for last.”

“You still have more?” asked Ix, slightly exasperated.

“I’m at the age when I want to talk about the things I remember. I won’t take you on any more detours once it’s over.”

“I guess it’s fine, then,” said Ix with a shrug.

“Why do you think people worship the sky?”

“Sky? ...Oh, you’re talking about Heaven’s Worship?” Ix remembered the Marayist festival. “That’s the one where they all gather at the end of the year and gaze at the sky, right...? It’s held around this time of year, too, now that you mention it.”

“It’s curious,” Riess remarked as if she was talking to herself. “The only thing in the sky, besides the moon, are the stars above it. It’s not like God lives up there.”

“Is that all you wanted to tell me? That you think the event is weird?”

“No, I think it’s a very beautiful ritual.”

“...So what’s this thing you saved for last, then?”

“You are impatient, huh?”

“I’m at the age when I can’t put up with anything.”

Riess nodded in resignation.

“During Heaven’s Worship, everyone in Estosha wishes on the stars. Since this town is the closest to God...,” She pointed a slender finger toward the sky. “...our voices carry from the Estosha Chapel up to the sky. That’s why there are so many stories in this city. Everyone talks because they want God to hear them. They tell all sorts of silly, pointless tales. But they shine like stars, so God draws near to listen. People say we’re close to God, but it’s actually the opposite—it’s God who gets close to us.”

“Is that what you were waiting to tell me?”

“...Will you come to Heaven’s Worship with me?” inquired Riess, looking up at Ix from inside his coat. She sounded a little unsure of herself for a change. But a moment later, she returned to her normal tone and said, “Ah, I got nervous. I was saving the invitation for last. So how about it?”

He wasn’t so sure what to think about that last part.

“You’re jumping the gun asking me to come with you, Riess,” he replied. “How do you even know who I am? Why are you inviting me to the festival? I don’t know how to reply to an invitation like that.”

“Don’t worry, I’m done talking now.” She closed her eyes for a moment. “What do you want to wish for on the stars? Think it over.”

At that, she fell silent.

Just as Riess said, the path forward was completely straight. In fact, they were outside the city limits. Apparently, the city only had walls on the side that faced the border to the neighboring nation. The other sides had fences only to prevent animals coming near. The area probably had hardly any magic beasts living in it, either, which was why Estosha had been able to expand over the years.

At the base of a far-off hill was a small forest, which surrounded a stone building. Though the white walls of the structure were conspicuous, it still

looked oddly harmonious against the natural backdrop. Ix could easily guess it was the Lus Monastery. That was where his most recent request had come from and where he would be working over the winter.

He noticed a fine sweat on his palms. He was nervous.

Riess's words ran through his mind over and over: *the City of God*.

She was right; this city wasn't just significant to the Marayists. The names Estosha and Rednoff had special meaning to wandmakers as well.

Rednoff was the legendary craftsman who'd developed the fundamentals for crafting man-made wands. When the world finally acknowledged the value of his creations, Rednoff's skills had reached their peak. It was then that he came to this town, Estosha, and was never heard from again. Though there were a number of stories about his fate, ranging from him committing suicide to secretly slipping away and leading a life of solitude, there was not a single clue as to his whereabouts. There was a grave for him in the capital, but the casket was empty.

There was, however, a legend passed down among wandmakers, told as though it was true:

Rednoff had crafted the ultimate wand in this town.

That's what they said.

No one knew who'd first told the story or if they had any proof. It was obviously just a tall tale. But the reason this story was told over and over was because it held some sort of irresistible magic of its own.

The ultimate wand. There wasn't a single craftsman who didn't dream of it, who didn't aspire to forge it.

That's why they worked day in and day out to improve their craft, why they constantly thought: *Would the ultimate magic catalyst be a wand? Or a staff? What wood would it take? What material would comprise its core? What adoption method would you use to create it? What kind of person could make a wand like that? Could that person be...me?*

People had high hopes that Munzil, Ix's master, would forge that fabled

catalyst. But in the end, he'd only ever made "excellent wands," never "the ultimate wand."

There was an alluring quality to a story that said that, while all these wandmakers may come and go, Rednoff, their inspiration and genesis, had actually already achieved the impossible. It also provided a potential explanation as to his disappearance. Needless to say, a craftsman who made the ultimate wand would no longer have a reason to go on living.

In other words, Rednoff was to wandmakers as God was to ordinary people, which was why they, too, considered Estosha significant. There were even a few ludicrous stories about the ultimate wand being hidden somewhere in the city or a neighboring country stealing it during a war.

Ix obviously didn't put stock in those tales. Rednoff had accomplished great things, but his time had long passed. These days, his crafting techniques were quite inefficient. It had taken years of improvements upon his methods to birth modern wands; there was no way Rednoff could have been just a single step away from producing the ultimate catalyst. Assuming such an item even existed.

Still, Ix was a member of the wandmaker community, if only barely, so he was aware of Estosha and even felt drawn to the place. Hearing the history surrounding the town had only amplified those feelings.

Just as he decided to thank Riess for showing him around, Ix realized she had disappeared at some point. It seemed he'd been too lost in thought to notice when she'd slipped out from under his jacket.

The monastery had looked far away when he exited the city, but the walk actually wasn't that bad. The sheer size of the building, along with the abnormal quiet of the place, took Ix aback as he approached. He'd heard a lot of people lived here, but the only thing he could make out now was the rustle of the wind in the trees. There were no sounds of life.

Save for an abrupt shout.

"Ah, you're here! Finally!"

Someone stood by the monastery's entrance, one hand on their hip and the

other pointing at Ix, who walked up to respond.

“Seriously! Give some consideration to the person you made wait this whole time!” The person’s almond-shaped red eyes angled even more as they continued to rattle on. They had sky-blue hair. “I was so excited about another apprentice coming, but you just never showed. Were you not looking forward to meeting another apprentice at all?!”

“Sorry, were you cold?” Ix managed to say, despite being overwhelmed by the person’s force.

“Cold? What the hell are you on about? You made me wait! Who cares about the weather?! I was thinking we could have lunch together, but you never came, so I had to eat alone, which makes my stomach hurt. And when you *still* didn’t turn up after that, I got worried that you’d been in an accident. The waiting was the worst part!”

“...Oh.”

“Maybe you should actually think about what you’ve done. Eh, whatever. I’m Shuno. Nice to meet you.” They held out their right hand, still in its thick glove.

“Yeah. I’m—”

“Ix.”

“Huh?”

In the brief moment Ix was thrown off, Shuno reached up and brushed both of his shoulders.

“You okay? You’re not cold?” they asked, their expression serious as they brought their face closer. “This is what happens when you stop to smell the roses every five steps.”

Ix shook his head, not understanding what they were saying at all. That’s when he saw the snow—his namesake—piled on his shoulders. He glanced around, wondering when it had started to fall. The fluttering white flakes that filled his vision looked like shuno flowers—their namesake—dancing on the wind.

1

Bells rang in two locations: from inside the monastery and from the bell tower in the town of Estosha. They were announcing the time.

Once the ringing stopped, the sound of work could be heard throughout the monastery. Wood being cut, liquid being stirred, heavy objects being dragged. But what you couldn't hear was conversation. The monk showing them the way didn't say a single word, nor did his steps make any noise as he continued down the corridor.

Just like the town of Estosha, Lus Monastery had a long history. It had been built hundreds of years ago and served as the home for devout Marayist believers who longed for a quiet life. The sprawling complex contained its own farmland, which allowed it to be self-sufficient. The monks oversaw a variety of tasks, including carpentry, smithing, and medicine making. They sold what they made in town to raise the funds to keep the place running. Every person within the monastery worked hard to serve the Lord, so the goods they created were both higher quality and lower priced than average. There were even some merchants who purchased their products cheap to sell at a profit in other cities.

The building showed obvious signs of disrepair; it was actually a miracle how long it had lasted, considering when it had been built. For a place that housed tens of people, it was also surprisingly clean. That was undoubtedly a by-product of their ascetic lifestyle.

While Ix and Shuno followed along, they passed a number of monks, each giving a polite bow. None of them said a single word.

"H-hey," whispered Shuno, walking beside Ix. "This is my first time in a monastery. Will they get angry if we talk?"

"Dunno..." said Ix vaguely with a tilt of his head.

“Have you been here before?”

“Nope.”

“R-really? You seem pretty calm... Ah, you just look that way, don’t you? Bet you’re all anxious inside.”

“Maybe.”

“I—I thought so! Don’t think you have to bottle it all up. You can talk to me if you’re nervous. ’Cause I’m not at all.”

“I appreciate it.”

“All right, then. But, you know, it’s super quiet even though there are fifty people living here...”

By this point, Shuno had forgotten to whisper and was speaking at their normal volume. The monk guiding them turned back and cleared his throat loudly.

“Ah, s-sorry...” They immediately scrunched up their shoulders. “Guess they really will get mad at us. Make sure you’re careful, too, Ix.”

Shuno shot a serious look at the other apprentice, who nodded reluctantly.

This was what it had been like since they’d met at the monastery’s entrance and briefly introduced themselves to each other. Shuno had been given a Declaration of Equivalency as a test, which they would need to pass before going independent. Once they learned that Ix was still just an apprentice, and younger on top of that, they’d been acting like they were his mentor or something.

“Oh yeah. I know I’m the more experienced of us, but you don’t have to treat me like your superior or anything, Ix. I’m still an apprentice, just like you.” Despite having just angered the monks, Shuno kept on babbling. “But if you ever run into trouble, feel free to come to me for help. I should be able to figure something out as the senior wandmaker.”

Far from making fun of Ix, Shuno seemed genuinely concerned for him. At one point, with complete sincerity, they even said, “If your master gets in trouble, it’ll partly be because I didn’t keep a close enough eye on you. In that case, I’ll

come with you to apologize.”

Ix didn't know how to respond to most of this, so he stuck with giving noncommittal replies. However, his tone turned oddly weak in response to that last comment from Shuno.

“B-but don't get me wrong. I'm not worried about your skill. Master said you could be trusted, after all.”

“Your master?”

“Y-yeah. Wait, you didn't hear? He's the one who recommended you for this job...”

“All that was delivered to me was a letter from the monastery. What's your master's name?”

“Marlan. You really don't know him? That's weird. Why'd he recommend you for this, then? He told me he met you somewhere in Leirest, and you evaluated a lot of wands with just a glance. Only a seasoned craftsman could've done something like that...”

Ix turned the name Marlan over and over in his mind and came back with nothing. He did remember evaluating a bunch of wands once, during the incident he'd been dragged into at the party last fall. Marlan must have been one of the attendees. But what Ix didn't understand was why anyone would think highly of what he'd done. Abnormal situation aside, even an apprentice who'd just started their training could have accomplished that.

“That's why I've been looking forward to meeting you so much,” continued Shuno. “I'm itching to see you make a wand. Mind if I watch?”

“I don't really mind, but...”

“...But what?” Shuno asked, eyes darting side to side and a stiff smile coming to their lips. Ix wasn't sure how they'd taken his momentary hesitation. “Seems like you've been annoyed with me for a while. I-I'm getting on your nerves with all this talking, aren't I...? I am; I know I am. I get it; it's distracting to have someone jabbering away nonstop. I'll shut my mouth...”

“It's not a big deal.”

“R-really?”

Ix nodded. It was true that the conversation was a little tedious, but he suspected things would get even more tedious if he told Shuno that. There was no real harm in them chatting with him.

“O-oh!” Shuno’s expression immediately brightened. “You should have said something if it made you that happy.”

“Huh?”

“Since you don’t show anything on your face, Ix.”

Just as he was about to protest that he hadn’t said anything about being happy, the monk in front of them came to a halt and turned around.

“Ah, s-sorry...,” said Shuno, squeezing their eyes shut.

“Wait here, please,” said the monk, pointing at a door next to him while ignoring Shuno. “It seems the craftsman will be late. The abbot will come to greet you shortly. We’ve also arranged for someone to assist you while you’re here. Please ask him any questions you have regarding your work or daily lives.”

“O-oh. Thanks... Ha-ha-ha,” said Shuno.

The monk bowed and left.

They had been brought to a simple room. Ix couldn’t tell what it was used for normally. Several long tables lined the chamber, and there were many chairs against the wall. A fireplace near the front of the room had been lit, so it was already warm. So warm, in fact, that Ix was starting to sweat in his coat. The place was also thoroughly cleaned, without a single speck of dust on the floor.

They each grabbed a chair, set them next to each other, and sat down. Shuno had been roving their eyes around nervously from the moment they entered the room.

“H-huh...so the craftsman’s going to be late? At least we weren’t the last ones here.”

“Do you know who’s coming?” asked Ix.

“No, I just heard they’re a wandmaker based in Estosha. The pay’s not great

when you do jobs for a place like this, and the assignments usually end up being pretty tough, too, so only locals or apprentices like us are willing to take them. Anyway, I hope this person is nice.”

“A craftsman based in Estosha...”

“Hmm, you think you know who it might be?”

“There’s someone I sort of know.” This was rare for Ix, since he had so few connections to other people in the industry. “A letter came to my master’s shop a few years ago. It was from a wandmaker named Coaku.”

The man had left an impression on Ix because Munzil had exchanged several letters with him, a rarity for his master. Though technically it had been Ix who had read and replied to the correspondences after Munzil put him up to it. He recalled being nervous at the prospect of responding to an older craftsman. Incidentally, Ix had first learned of Heaven’s Worship through those exchanges.

As he thought back to that time, Shuno stared at him with shock, then asked, “Coaku? Do you mean Coaku Shtah?!”

“...Is he famous?”

“Uh, yeah, well.” Shuno looked away in embarrassment. “I heard the name from Master Marlan. Coaku’s the most experienced craftsman in Estosha right now. S-someone as important as him wouldn’t come for this job. Well, I don’t actually know if he’s all that, but you’d think the most senior wandmaker in the city would be pretty important. Probably.”

“You don’t seem so sure...”

“But your master lives in Leirest, right? Their connections must run pretty deep if they know a craftsman all the way out here. Would you mind introducing me later? I might even know their name already.”

“You ask for an introduction, but I’m not sure you could really say my master lives in Leirest...”

It would be too annoying to explain that Munzil had passed and that he was only working as an apprentice under another wandmaker who’d learned from his old master. Besides, Ix had a hunch that telling Shuno this would lead to

some overblown comments on their part. The truth of the matter was that he was just taking advantage of Morna's generosity and living in her shop. That wasn't something to be proud of.

As Ix considered what to say, there was a knock on the door.

"Is everyone all right? I heard a shout," came the voice of a young man from the other side of the entrance.

"Ah, everything's fine!" Shuno made a big show of clearing their throat. "I, um, just sneezed really loudly. With all this cold, the snow falling, and everything."

"I am so sorry. Is the room not warm enough?"

"O-oh, no, it's not your fault. The chill from outside just got in my bones is all." Shuno's convoluted response was both an expression of concern for the other person and an attempt to hide their own embarrassment. "Anyway, why don't you just come in?"

2

The young monk entered the room. He looked to still be in his teens; though he was tall, his freckled face still showed signs of youth. The boy's head was shaved close, and his habit seemed to be a hand-me-down, since it fit too snugly on his body.

"My name is Beter," he said with a polite bow. "I've been tasked with caring for you while you work. If you have need of anything during your stay, please just ask."

"Thanks," said Shuno, standing up and offering a hand.

"Ummm..." Beter stared at their outstretched palm with uncertainty.

"Ah, I forgot to introduce myself. I'm Shuno."

"Ah, Shuno. Very nice to meet you. And you are...?" asked Beter, looking at Ix.

"Ix," he replied from his seat.

“N-nice to meet you, Ix—”

“Oh, he’s not angry or anything, so don’t worry,” interjected Shuno somewhat boastfully. “He’s just the kind of person who doesn’t show much emotion on his face. But inside, he’s overjoyed to meet you.”

“Is that so?”

“Yep. Hey, why don’t you have a seat, too?”

“No thank you, I’m fine as I am. Now then...,” said Beter before launching into a quick overview of the monastery’s structure and rules.

The two apprentices would mostly work in this room, and they were to avoid wandering around the monastery. They would also need to refrain from speaking with the monks and shouting. Essentially, they would have to steer clear of the residents as much as possible so as to not interrupt them.

“Ummm...,” said Shuno quietly. “Does that mean we shouldn’t really talk to each other, either?”

“No, not at all. You are welcome to converse with each other. These rules apply to us, not you. Also, since this is currently part of my job, there’s no issue with speaking to me, either,” explained Beter.

“R-really?” Shuno smiled and looked at Ix. “So we can still chat. Wait, but then why did they get angry with me earlier?”

“Because you shouted,” said Ix.

“...Hmm.” Shuno closed their eyes and gave a small cough.

Since the craftsman was going to be late, Beter decided to show the two around the monastery. Cold air swept their fire-warmed cheeks the moment they stepped out of the room. The hallway ran along the outer edge of the building and gave them an excellent view of the surrounding scenery. Snow was pouring down outside, and the field that led to town was being swallowed by white.

“It’s really piling up...,” murmured Shuno.

“This way,” said Beter as he walked down the hall. “At this time of day, everyone will be reading in their rooms. We probably won’t bump into anyone

else.”

Staring at the blanket of white, the pair followed along. There was nothing around them, and it was unnaturally quiet outside, as if the snow swallowed all sound.

Actually, that silence was to be expected. The monastery was a world of purity, separated from the rest of society. A world dedicated to God. It was like a bubble rising up through the water. That was why no sound carried here.

On the first floor, they peered into several workrooms. Some were lined with large barrels while others were filled with tools. Despite the fact that these chambers were used for labor, the tools were perfectly arranged in neat rows. Things were so orderly that even Shuno shut their mouth and stopped fidgeting on the tour. This level also contained a kitchen and a library, but there was no one to be found in them at the moment.

The back exit of the kitchen led to a garden. It had been cleared of trees to form a large vegetable plot. Though white snow was piling on the black soil, there were still some plants that hadn't been harvested. They had to be winter vegetables.

At the entrance to the monastery was a silver bell. Beter explained it was to chime the hour.

Farther in was a staircase that led up to the second floor, crisscrossing twice as it climbed.

The upper level seemed to primarily consist of dormitories, their narrow entrances packed tightly along the hallway. The door to each cell contained a small window you could peer into, revealing only a bed, a small table, and an elderly monk flipping the pages of a book. None of the residents turned to glance at them as they passed through the hallway.

At some point, they passed another person in the hall. He must have been old, as his back was hunched over. The man's face and form were hidden beneath rags, and he was pushing a cart laden with books. Instead of saying anything to him, Beter simply made eye contact in greeting. Just as the man passed Ix, the wheel of his cart caught on a small lip in the floor, causing one of the books to fall.

Ix picked it up and gave it back but predictably received silence in response. The man accepted the tome and continued along at a steady clip.

The majority of the rooms were occupied, but the last two were empty, and their doors were open. Some daily necessities were still there, though.

“People were in those cells until just recently,” said Beter as they went back to the first floor. “They were two lay brothers who had just entered the monastery in the fall. They ran away a few days ago.”

“Well, I’m sure there’re some people who just aren’t suited to this kind of life,” remarked Shuno. “Might be rude of me to assume so, but I imagine that kind of thing happens a lot.”

“Ah, well...” Beter nodded with a pained smile. “These two were passionate, though, so I was sure they would be fine. They said they wanted to live a quiet life of faith to atone for the harm they’d brought to others... Apparently, they were originally adventurers. We came to rely on them for jobs that required strength. Their departure was so sudden, too...”

“You seem really bothered by it. Were you close with them?” asked Shuno, who seemed like they were having a hard time understanding.

“As close as I was with any of the others, I thought...” Beter furrowed his brow in worry. “But the thing is, they said they saw a ghost.”

“Ghost?” murmured Ix.

“Yes, that’s what they claimed before fleeing the monastery,” said Beter, nodding. “I would get it if they’d admitted the life was too difficult for them. But a specter...”

“They were adventurers, yeah?” said Shuno with a frown. “I mean, I’m not trying to disparage them, but I bet they were so used to living a life of freedom that having all these restrictions just became too much. The ghost stuff was probably just an excuse.”

“We don’t chase people who leave the monastery. You don’t need a reason to abandon this life. Which is why I find it strange they would go to the effort of concocting such an unbelievable excuse,” replied Beter.

Shuno nodded in agreement, since it made sense, and the conversation ended there.

After taking a trip around the building, they went back to the chamber they'd started in to find seven monks waiting. One was an elderly man with white hair and a beard. The other six monks looked to be in their twenties or thirties. They stood side by side in a line, gazing at Ix and Shuno as they entered the room.

"Ah, wh-what?" gasped Shuno, recoiling from the stares.

"I am the abbot," the elderly man announced in a mild tone. "Beter, we've received notice that he won't be coming today and that we should ask these two to begin work without him."

"Understood," said Beter with a nod.

"I apologize for the short greeting, but I must be on my way." The abbot gave a short thank-you and quickly left the room.

Ix waited for the door to close, then asked, "What he just said, did he mean the craftsman isn't coming? I thought this assignment was for the three of us, though..."

"Yes, that is the case. It seems he's tied up with another assignment at the moment," responded Beter, nodding.

"But he also said to go ahead with the job, right? Which means these people lined up here"—Shuno snapped their fingers—"are the people we're going to be making staffs for?"

The monks nodded in silence.

"...Uh, I was hoping for a more energetic response," Shuno said.

"You're going to make them angry again," said Ix with a snort.

3

All six of the men had only just recently been promoted to monk from lay brother. To accomplish this, they'd needed to get a recommendation from the abbot and pass a standardized test. Magic-wielding was on the exam, and if

they were promoted, they would receive permission to carry a staff of their own in public. Ix had accepted a commission to make those staffs.

This kind of work came often during winter, and it was actually nice to have, since there was little else to do during the season. Even so, most craftsmen refused to take this sort of job. Not only were monasteries unlikely to have a large pool of funds available to compensate who they hired, but they were also aware that commissions dried up for wandmakers in winter. These factors put monasteries in a better position to negotiate good rates. All in all, the payment just wasn't worth the effort. Besides, monks had little opportunity to fight, so their staffs would go almost entirely unused after their creation. They were more of a commemorative item. Obviously, no wandmaker wanted their work to go unused, so anyone skilled refused the work.

Despite all that, most craftsmen hated jobs from monasteries for a separate reason.

"Thank you for your help," said the monks as they showed Ix and Shuno what they held.

Each monk was carrying a branch of artemisia, its twigs and bark removed, of different thicknesses and lengths. Some of them even had holes from bugs chewing on the wood.

Ix held back a sigh.

Monks had to "choose their staff" by preparing their own wood and core material as part of their training. They cut the wood from the nearby forests before doing a small amount of work to it. Getting core material wasn't as easy, so each person brought theirs when they joined the monastery. The wandmaker would have to produce a staff from these components.

No one but a craftsman would understand how much of a pain this was. There were even people who thought the way the monks did it was easier, figuring that the wandmaker just needed to put the materials together, since they were already prepped. Obviously, it wasn't that simple. In fact, making a wand or staff from preselected ingredients was far more difficult than adjusting a stock wand or crafting a staff to individual specifications. Wood and core materials had certain compatibilities, as did the user. If they weren't in

alignment, the wielder's mana could be greatly decreased, or they might even end up with a product that couldn't cast a spell.

The monks studied a little wandmaking before preparing the materials for their staffs, but they were still amateurs. Despite having learned only the most basic of the basics, they often convinced themselves they understood everything, leading them to select unacceptable wood. Then there was the work they did to it, which you could call nothing better than haphazard.

Ix shook his head, thinking about how annoying the job would be. Shuno must have felt the same, because they took one glance at the wood and gave an unambiguous groan.

"R-right, Ix, there are six of them. So, you take three, and I take three," they said, trying to pull themselves together. "You can decide who you want to work with. Since I'm the more—"

"I'm not the one who should determine that," interrupted Ix. "Beter, have them choose who they want to work with."

"Oh, okay," he acquiesced.

The six monks hesitated for a moment, but Beter gave them a look, and they gathered together to discuss things quietly.

"You sure about this?" Shuno whispered as they came over to Ix, who was staring at the monks in the corner. "And after I tried to give you the choice, too."

"The working on their wood is equally terrible. It wouldn't have made a difference who I picked," said Ix.

"Huh? No, that's not what I mean." Shuno shrugged. "If you let them decide who they want, they'll, you know, all choose me."

"...If that happens, you can make them all. I'll just provide support."

"Seriously? But I'll feel bad for you."

"Craftsmen shouldn't force their problems on the clients."

"So that's what it's about..." Shuno smiled. "All right, what you said just now is enough to tell me everything. If no one chooses you, I'll just have to explain to

them how reliable you are.”

“A wandmaker’s personality has nothing to do with their reliability.”

“Well, obviously. If they were connected, you would have failed long ago.”

“...You’re probably right.”

“Uh, wait, I’m sorry—that was a seriously mean joke. Really, I’m sorry.” Shuno spread their hands. “But, you know, it might be good for you to show your emotions a little more, Ix.”

As the two of them chatted, the monks finished their discussion.

“Um...,” Beter spoke up hesitantly.

“Oh, they’ve decided?” Shuno turned toward him.

“Well, they’ve each said which person they would prefer, but...” Beter cast his eyes down, having difficulty getting the words out. “Their decisions are a bit lopsided.”

“Wait, you can’t mean they all chose one of us?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“What, really?” Shuno’s eyes opened wide. “Oooh, no, that’s not good...”

“Everyone wants Ix to make their staff,” revealed Beter.

“...What?”

It was Ix who’d said that.

He simply couldn’t understand why the monks had picked him. This was his first time meeting them, and they didn’t know anything about his level of skill or experience, so they shouldn’t have leaned toward him so heavily. Shuno was obviously surprised as well and stood there with a look of disbelief on their face for a few moments.

“W-w...” They moved their mouth wordlessly as they tried to respond. “Wait a minute, why are all of you choosing Ix? I mean, he is reliable, and if you really want it, I’ll just support your selection...but this... It’s a bit hurtful, you know?” Tears started to form in their eyes.

“No, they probably just don’t know our station,” said Ix. “Let me explain, everyone. Shuno’s older and more experienced than I am. I’m just an apprentice, but they’re about to go independent, so they’re closer to being an actual craftsman. I think you should reconsider.”

After saying that, the six monks looked at one another. They’d probably figured the opposite was true. People often assumed Ix was older than he was due to the color of his hair.

“N-no, Ix, you don’t have to worry about me,” said Shuno. “Now you’ll be the one who’s left out. But it does make me happy that you care.”

“I’m not worried about you; I’m just stating the truth.”

“That’s because you care. You would lie if you didn’t,” said Shuno with a smile.

“...No, it’s just that’s the way it has to be to satisfy the client. I’ll support you with everything I’ve got.”

“U-um...,” interjected one of the monks as he raised his hand. “Excuse me, may we have another moment to discuss this?”

“Huh? I don’t mind...,” said Ix.

It seemed the revelation that Shuno was about to go independent had changed things. Even if the monks wouldn’t have much opportunity to use their catalysts, it was only natural for them to want a good craftsman to make them. Ultimately, the conversation ended with Ix and Shuno each being assigned to three of the six men.

The apprentices got straight to work, dividing the space between themselves. Shuno and Ix sat with their backs to each other in the room they’d split in half.

“From now on, this is my crafting space. You can come over to watch me every once in a while,” said Shuno while laying out tools. “Since I’ll swing by to see what you’re up to sometimes, too.”

Ix gathered the three monks he was now in charge of and asked them to show him the wood and core materials they’d prepared. He wouldn’t get anywhere without checking those first.

But...

He furrowed his brow as he examined the wood.

Monks traditionally wielded staffs, though there weren't actually any rules that demanded they do so. The three men who'd chosen Ix all wanted staffs and had prepared long cuts of wood accordingly.

"Um... What do you think?" asked the monk who was sitting across from Ix.

"What do I think?" asked Ix back, his eyes never leaving the stick in the man's hands.

"Well, I just wondered if there's a problem with the work I did on it."

Ix removed the magnifying lens from his left eye and stared at the monk. Behind him, he could hear Shuno saying, "Huh?! Ah, i-it's so well-made, ha-ha-ha..." They must have been checking the wood as well. And from the sound of Shuno complimenting the monks, it seemed those three were also interested in how they'd done.

"It's all right. You didn't completely botch it," said Ix, trying to reassure his client. "The mistakes on the other two aren't too bad, either. I should be able to make staffs out of these."

"M-mistakes?" The monk looked slightly insulted. "I worked so carefully, though."

"You made some unnecessary adjustments to it. This sort of prep is for wands, not staffs. But fortunately, it's not so bad that I can't do anything with it."

"...Oh."

"Show me your core materials."

Despite what Ix had just said, if there was a problem, it was going to be with the core material. Since the monks of this monastery traditionally selected wood from the same species of tree, it was guaranteed to be suitable for staffs. But that wasn't the case with the core material. Ix was on edge because there were so many options the monks could have chosen from, and he didn't know what they might pull out.

He took the materials one after the other and inspected them. They were all stone-type cores, which set Ix at ease, since they had few quirks and wide compatibility.

Today they would be doing only a simple check of the components. As Ix returned them to the monks, Beter came over and said, “You’ve worked hard today. Will you start crafting tomorrow?”

“No, it’ll take a while to design the staffs. I’ll start making them after that. Shuno will probably do the same.”

“Ah, Shuno...,” said Beter with a quick glance in their direction.

Ix turned back to find Shuno groaning, core material in hand. The monk standing across from them looked concerned.

“Um, is there a prob—?” he started.

“Wait,” Shuno interjected, holding a hand up to the monk. “I’m thinking right now.”

“O-oh...”

Curious, Ix went over to check out what was going on and saw that Shuno was holding a clump of some milky-white substance. They were so focused, they didn’t notice Ix watching from behind. Looking closely at their hand, Ix saw a strangely twisted lump, which might have been stone.

Ix couldn’t help bringing a hand to his mouth.

It was moma.

This was actually his first time seeing it in person. It was an incredibly uncommon resource, so rare he hadn’t even seen it in his master’s shop. That didn’t mean it was particularly powerful or valuable, but the material did explain Shuno’s worries.

Based on what wandmaking literature had to say about moma’s disposition, it had poor compatibility with artemis, the wood all the monks were using. Ix quickly ran through a few possible methods for getting the two substances to work together, but he didn’t think any of them would bear fruit. But Shuno couldn’t very well tell the monk to switch to a different core material at this point in the

process.

Noticing Ix's consternation as he stood there silently, the monk grew even more uneasy.

Just then, however, Shuno gave a shout.

"All right!" With an exaggerated nod, they returned the moma back to the monk. "Yep, it's not a problem. Here, you hold on to this for now."

"Huh? A-all right," he said, his eyes wide as he accepted the material.

"Okay, now I've checked everyone's materials, right? Oh, Ix. You didn't have any problems, did you?" said Shuno once they noticed Ix standing right behind them.

"No, nothing on my side, but—"

"Great, looks like we're both getting off to a good start."

Shuno smiled in satisfaction, cutting off Ix as he tried to ask if they really didn't have any issues.

Though it didn't feel like much time had passed since the noon bell, night fell early in winter, and it was already getting darker outside. Each of the monks expressed their gratitude and left the room.

That left the three of them in the workroom. Beter bowed his head as he said, "I apologize for any burden we place on you."

"Nah, it's no problem, but...", Shuno replied, glancing around the room. "Uh, where are we going to be staying for the night? I heard you'd be preparing us lodgings. Are you going to let us use this room?"

"Um, about that...", said Beter, who sounded like he was having trouble getting his words out. "We've made arrangements for you to stay in Estosha..."

"You're saying we have to walk all the way back there now? Urgh, that's kind of a pain."

"Well, I suppose we do have those empty rooms you saw on the tour."

"Oh, the ones that used to belong to the guys who ran away?" Shuno clapped a fist into their palm. "They're a bit small, but it's better than walking back and

forth.”

“Yes, if you would like to use those rooms, you may, but...” Beter looked away from the two of them.

“Is there some sort of a problem?” asked Ix.

“An issue? Well, no, not with you, Ix,” replied Beter.

“Um, is it a problem with me, then?” asked Shuno, blinking in surprise.

“Well, there’s just one thing I need to confirm first.” Beter cleared his throat, steeled himself, and asked, “Shuno, are you a man?”

“I don’t see how that’s relevant,” they replied with a smile.

“It is very important,” said Beter carefully. “Just as men are not allowed in a nunnery, women are not allowed in a monastery. The same holds true anywhere. We need this arrangement for our life of abstinence. Of course, there are exceptions, like now. While we don’t have any issue with inviting special craftspeople into the building, staying overnight is a completely different story. I also believe that this has something to do with why all the monks picked Ix at first...”

“Ah, I see,” said Shuno, staring up at the ceiling with their arms crossed. “Hmm... Yeah, uh, I don’t feel like telling you that information just for this. I’ll stay in Estesha.”

“Understood,” said Beter with a nod. “And you, Ix?”

“I’ll go back there, too.”

As Ix said that, he noticed Shuno nodding slightly out of the corner of his eye.

4

They borrowed two lamps and returned to Estesha. The snow was falling only lightly, but the field was already coated with white, and the road back to town was completely concealed. They would certainly have lost their way had it not been for the lights of the city.

Compared to Ix, who was wearing the bare minimum, Shuno looked massive in their big coat and oversized rain hat. Every part of their body was covered in protective clothing.

“Ix, are you curious about me?” asked Shuno as they walked beside Ix.

“No, not really.” He shook his head. “Honestly, I don’t care.”

“Ha-ha, that’s very like you... Why didn’t you stay in the monastery? Wait, did you want to be with me?”

Glancing sideways, Ix saw Shuno in profile, white breath coming out with their every exhalation. They were lit up from below, from the lamp in their hand.

Ix hadn’t noticed until Beter pointed it out, but he really couldn’t tell Shuno’s gender. Their voice and face were both androgynous, and their winter clothing obscured their body. Shuno could claim they were a man or a woman, and Ix would take them at their word either way.

But that had zero influence on their job right now. What mattered here was their wandmaking skills. Ix had no interest in anything but that.

“Yeah,” he said with a nod.

“Huh? What are you agreeing with?”

“I want to talk to you.”

“H-huh?” stuttered Shuno, looking around for some reason. But they had nothing to lay eyes on except a snow-covered field. “H-how am I supposed to respond to something so direct...?”

“The moma. How can you combine that with the artey?” asked Ix.

“Huh?”

“I can’t come up with any way to use moma in a staff made of artey. But you decided it wasn’t going to be a problem earlier. How are you going to make it into a staff? Have you worked with it before?”

Shuno stared at Ix, at a loss for a while, then let out a sigh, as if all strength had left them. “W-wand talk...? No, today was my first time seeing moma.”

“I’ve been thinking about how to get it to work this whole time but can’t

come up with anything. No matter what you do, you'll get a defect at the conduit junction..."

"Oh yeah, you'll definitely get a leak." Shuno immediately echoed Ix's concerns. "But if you put in, like, a balancing mechanism sort of thing, or something, in the inlet for the leakage, then... Ummm, I mean, it's sort of like a reverse Rednoff-Seiquan-style thing. I've got it all worked out in my head, but it's hard to explain... Anyway, I think it won't be a problem if I do it that way."

It took a few seconds for Shuno's explanation to unfurl in Ix's mind.

But as he thought it over, goose bumps slowly formed on his skin. This wasn't because of the cold; if anything, Ix felt hot. It was intuitive. The solution Shuno had devised would work perfectly for making a staff. But...

"...Did you invent this procedure, Shuno?" asked Ix.

"*'Invent'* makes it sound like a big deal. That guy went to all the trouble of getting his core material, and I would feel bad telling him I didn't need it. That's why I came up with the technique."

That's impossible, Ix nearly blurted out.

In simple terms, the process Shuno explained essentially involved swapping the mana input and output on the staff. It wasn't a particularly complex idea. Just saying that much was enough for someone to understand. Yet, as far as Ix was aware, that sort of technique didn't exist anywhere in the world currently. It was actually an incredibly abnormal thought for a wandmaker to have. It was a total departure from commonsense wandmaking.

This discovery would only be applicable in very rare cases, but if Shuno really had developed it in such a short time...

They would be nothing short of a genius.

Ix's legs trembled.

Up until this point, he had met several people who could rightfully be called geniuses, but he never expected one to waltz into his life as casually as you might say *good morning*. To think he would find someone so gifted on this job of all things...

“Anyway, were you really honest with that one guy?” asked Shuno in a light tone, holding up a finger. They didn’t seem aware of how incredible they really were.

“...What are you talking about?” Ix managed to say, still reeling from shock.

“You know, the monk who did some seriously crazy work on his wood. There’s no way you’ll finish before winter ends if you have to redo everything. I was about to jump in and help if you started complaining.”

“No, it was fine...” Ix cocked his head in confusion. “Oh, you probably didn’t see it up close like I did. It wasn’t in that bad of shape. I’m planning on using it as is.”

“Huh...? But he’d worked it like it was going to be a wand, didn’t he? Or did he only half finish?”

“He finished. Seems he’s hardworking, for better or worse.”

“Wait... Wait, wait, wait.” Shuno brought a hand to their temple. “Uh, how the heck are you going to turn a stick in that condition into a staff? I don’t remember learning anything like that.”

“I doubt it’s the kind of technique you’d be taught.”

“Wh-what do you mean by that?”

“I don’t mean anything...” Ix frowned. He didn’t understand why Shuno was so invested in this line of conversation. “It’s just combining a few basic principles. Anyway, that doesn’t matter; I want to hear more about your tech —”

“Nope, wait. Just hold up.” Shuno grabbed Ix’s wrist. “Hang on. We obviously need to talk about this before we talk about that. So tell me.”

“All it is is...”

It wasn’t a difficult concept at all, so it didn’t take long for Ix to explain it. Yet after hearing it, Shuno just walked on in silence for a while, lost in thought. Ix was losing his patience; he wanted to hear more about Shuno’s technique as soon as possible.

“So that’s it... I’d thought you might be able to join two, but three...?”

muttered Shuno before they raised their head and stared straight at Ix. "... You're incredible."

"Huh?" said Ix loudly in response to the abrupt, ludicrous praise.

He looked the other apprentice in the eye, trying to decide if they were being sarcastic, but they seemed serious as they stared back. Maybe Shuno just thought it was amazing because they didn't happen to come up with it themselves. No matter how you sliced it, their idea was far superior.

"What are you talking about? You're the genius here," replied Ix, his voice somewhat hoarse.

"Wh-what?" Shuno asked back. "How can you say that? I mean, it makes me happy you think I'm so talented, but I don't remember doing anything worthy of being called that. You're not talking about the moma thing, are you? Anybody could've come up with that. But what you proposed isn't so simple. You couldn't develop a solution like yours without an incredibly thorough understanding of wandmaking theories. You just went and formulated a way of joining three base theories like it was nothing—that's super complicated! *That's* something a genius would do. You could give a lecture on it at the Academy."

"Are you serious? What I did was as simple as addition or subtraction. A child could do the same thing as long as they thought it through. And it's not like I came up with it in an instant like you. All I did was tweak the application of something I've been researching lately."

Recently, Ix had been looking into making wands that could withstand actual use despite being crudely worked. That research had led him to his idea. It was just dumb luck; it had nothing to do with ability or talent.

"Most importantly," continued Ix, "this is just a way to get something out of a worthless wand, not a path to forging an excellent one. Which means it's practically worthless for wandmaking as a whole. But your idea's the opposite. Not just anyone could have come up with it. No matter how much knowledge someone builds up, they're never going to have a breakthrough like that without a little bit of genius. Plus, your method could lead to all sorts of advancements. You've opened up a new path toward the future of wandmaking, Shuno."



“H-h-hey now, you’re clearly exaggerating,” they countered, looking away and placing a hand on their cheek. “That’s overboard, even for flattery... Okay, so listen, this is what I’m saying...”

Their discussion continued unabated, even when they arrived in Estosha and made it to their lodging. Since they were staying in separate rooms, they would have to drop the conversation.

They’d arrived at the doors to their rooms just as Ix was launching into a fervent explanation as to why Shuno’s idea was so valuable.

“All right, Ix, we’ll have to pick this up again tomorrow,” said Shuno, pointing a finger at him. “I’m not going to let this end while you’re ahead.”

“Just give up already.” He shook his head. “Assuming you’re understanding what I’m saying, you should realize by now that you’re the genius here.”

“Hmph. Well, whatever. You can think that for now. Tomorrow, I’m going to give such a good argument that you won’t be able to refute the fact that it’s *you* who’s the brilliant one.”

“I have no idea what makes you think you’ll be able to do that.”

“What did you just say?”

The pair stood there, hands on the doorknobs of their respective rooms, glaring at each other. Behind them, another guest passed by with a look of bewilderment.

5

In the end, their discussion stopped there because they shifted to a different topic the next day.

The monastery had arranged for Ix and Shuno to stay in a cheap inn, but it was run by a friendly elderly couple who kept the rooms spotless. Ix went to bed early after doing some routine maintenance on his tools. But in the time between him closing his eyes and actually falling asleep, he came up with a perfect counterargument.

At first, he thought he would just bring it up with Shuno the next day, but he couldn't hold back the urge to say something now. They were probably still up now anyway. With that in mind, he moved to the door of his room. Just when he was about to leave, a knock came from the other side. There stood Shuno, having had the exact same thought.

Both of them pointed out flaws in the other's argument, so they were unable to reach a conclusion. But that discussion lit a fire beneath a different debate, which continued until dawn broke. By the time they realized it, the two of them were collapsed on the floor, rays from the sunrise filtering through the window.

A thin morning mist shrouded the world.

The brisk outside air roused them as they walked to the monastery. A thin layer of snow coated the ground, and their feet left clear tracks as they traveled.

The sounds of labor greeted the pair at their destination; the day had already begun at the monastery.

"You don't have to bring the monks here today," Shuno told Beter, who was waiting for them at the entrance. "We did our measurements yesterday. We'll check them again once we finish our designs, but we'll work on our own until then."

"Understood." Beter nodded. "By the way, it seems he's arrived today."

"Huh? Who?" asked Shuno.

"The, um, craftsman."

"...Oh, right. We were supposed to have a real wandmaker here. Urgh... H-hey, Ix, you seem a bit nervous. I'm not, though. Not at all."

"No, I'm not really anxious," replied Ix.

"Oh man, you really do put on a brave face. It's actually pretty reassuring."

After being led to the same room as the day before, they started working on designs.

The two apprentices brought several tables together to form a simple work surface, since the designs for a staff were normally made on large sheets of

paper that were formed by attaching several smaller sheets together. Here they would jot down details and determine the final structure of the staffs.

The general design for each was already set, but they needed to iron out the details. You didn't need any of the ideas or inventions like the ones they'd developed the day before for this process—it was just moving your hand and filling the page. Long ago, craftsmen wouldn't do this sort of preparation. Most of them would just take the materials and jump right into forging the final product. In those days, lack of planning was proof of your skill as a craftsman.

But in modern wandmaking theory, it wasn't possible to make a wand without a design first. The principles of crafting wands had advanced to the point where you needed to do tricky calculations and construct elaborate conduits. It was impossible to handle all that in your head.

Ix worked in silence. He realized he was becoming absorbed in his task, and when his hand stopped moving, he felt like he'd forgotten to breathe the entire time. After listening for a few seconds to the crackle of the fire and the sound of a pencil on paper, he would turn back to his work.

Beter made an appearance before the lunch bell rang. Even though Ix had been at it all morning, he didn't have much of a design yet. It was taking longer than usual. He realized that for all his ability to focus, he'd been doing a lot of roundabout calculations.

"You must be tired," said Beter. "We have prepared lunch for you in the cafeteria, though it's just a simple dish."

"Huh, so you do a full three meals a day here?" said Shuno.

"It's important to eat enough to complete your work. But before that, I wanted to let you know that he's finally arrived."

"Huh? Who?"

"The craftsman."

"...Oh, right! You did mention that."

"I'll go get him now. Please wait here a moment," Beter said before leaving the chamber.

Shuno slowly turned to Ix. “Wh-what do we do?”

“You forgot again?” asked Ix.

“N-no way, I’ve been waiting on pins and needles for him to get here. You’re the one who’s worried, Ix—that’s you. Are you okay?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

Not long after that, Beter returned. Behind him was a small elderly man.

“Let me introduce you to Mr. Coaku Shtah. He runs a wand shop in Estosha,” announced Beter. Then he pointed to the two apprentices and said, “This is Shuno and Ix. They aren’t full-fledged craftspeople yet, but they’re skilled enough to have received Declarations of Equivalency. They’ve already begun working.”

The old man’s face was serene. He peered out of nearly closed eyes from behind his round spectacles. He was short enough that Ix had to look down at him, and his legs must have been weak because he walked with a cane. His outfit and hat were spotless. He looked less like a wandmaker and more like an elderly gentleman.

“I-I’m pleased to meet you,” said Shuno, while Ix bowed.

“Yes, yes, very pleased indeed to meet you two,” said Coaku as he took off his hat and held it in front of his chest. His tone was just as warm as his appearance suggested. Coaku held out a small hand, and the two of them each shook it. “They call me a craftsman, but I’m half-retired anyway, so no need to feel nervous.”

“Ah, no, it’s fine...” Shuno gave a big wave. “Uh...are there more than six monks? We’ve already sort of started the designs for the staffs, Master Coaku...”

“Oh, no worries. I don’t plan on doing much,” the craftsman responded. “I’ve asked to just oversee your work. I don’t think an old fart like me can do much anyway. Just think of me as a flower in a vase or a good luck charm.”

“I—I appreciate it... Ha-ha-ha!” Shuno smiled before their face instantly turned grim as they came close to Ix and whispered, “So we’re going to have an

experienced craftsman staring at us the whole time?”

“That’s reassuring,” said Ix.

“R-right, totally...”

Coaku apologized for arriving late. Apparently, he’d been asked to help with something in Estosha and found someone to substitute for him only yesterday.

“Well, just think of me as someone you can come to for advice on wands. At my age, you can’t just give up on things because you’ve got a prior arrangement.” He rubbed his head with his hand. The little hair he had left was white, and the top of his head was completely bald.

“You found a replacement without any issue?” asked Shuno.

“I did. They were nearby and studied under someone I knew a long time ago. Should be good for the job.”

Ix listened silently to Shuno and Coaku chatting. He was wondering if he should tell the craftsman that he’d apprenticed under Munzil, but he couldn’t think of how to say it, and he wasn’t sure it would make a difference if he brought it up. He’d probably just wonder why Ix bothered telling him.

In the end, Ix held his tongue, and the conversation drew to a close.

“Now then, I’m going to say hello to the abbot,” said Coaku with a bow. “Will we be in this room again in the afternoon?”

“Y-yes,” said Shuno with a nod.

“I shall see you both again, then.”

“I will show you the way,” offered Beter as he opened the door.

As the two left, Shuno sighed and muttered, “I can’t believe Coaku really came.”

But Ix didn’t hear.

On the other side of the doorway that Beter and Coaku were exiting through stood a small figure. Ix hadn’t been able to see her from behind the two men beforehand.

She pointed to herself.

“I’m his assistant.”

That’s what Riess said before chasing after Beter and Coaku with light footsteps. The sound of her running was blotted out by the chime of the noon bell.

6

Shuno had some cleaning up to do, so Ix headed off to get lunch first on his own.

The dining hall was already filled with monks. They were lined up neatly on the benches that ran on either side of the rows of long tables. Ix even saw the man who’d been pushing the book cart the day before. Even now, he was still wearing his rags, so Ix couldn’t make out his face. There wasn’t one word of conversation in the cafeteria, just the clinking of utensils against dishes.

Everyone received the exact same amount of food, and dishes had already been set out, each with a single serving. There were exactly as many plates as there were monks.

Ix didn’t feel like sitting with the brothers, so he took his meal to the courtyard instead. Not only did he feel out of place in the dining hall, but it seemed like even choking would be frowned upon there. He didn’t think he could get used to the silence. Besides, the monastery rules didn’t apply to him anyway.

A cutting wind assailed his cheeks once Ix exited the back door of the cafeteria. He headed down the path under the eaves and sat in a place that looked as good enough as any. The sun lit up the silver fields in the distance.

As he tore off a piece of bread and brought it to his mouth, a shadow suddenly fell into his view.

“Hello.”

His gaze met a pair of blank eyes. It was Riess. She was bent over, looking at him, a plate just like Ix’s in her hands.

“Can I sit with you?” she asked.

“Don’t mind,” he replied, expressionless.

Riess passed in front of him and sat to his left.

“It’s really bright here,” she remarked, squinting against the glare from the snow and raising a hand above her eyes. “Doesn’t it bother you?”

“Not particularly.”

“Really...? Maybe it’s because you’re taller,” murmured Riess, standing up to test her hypothesis. “No, that’s not any better. It’s still bright. Maybe I’m just sensitive to light? Or you’re insensitive? What do you think?”

“Both options mean the same thing,” replied Ix immediately.

“What a great answer.” Riess sat back down again, then looked up at Ix and said, “Nope, I don’t think that’s the kind of thing a monk would say.”

“What do you mean?”

“In other words, they’re thinking about God.”

Ix didn’t know what the *“in other words”* was referring to, but he kept listening without saying anything. Words spilled from the girl’s mouth. He knew another child who conversed in a similar fashion, though their words leaped in a slightly different way.

“Because God decides if something is considered bright or not,” continued Riess in almost a whisper. “Everyone living in the monastery uses God as their point of reference. Or at least they’re trying to find God in everything. But you’re not. You don’t think in those terms, do you?”

“Is that a question?”

“No, sorry. It doesn’t matter what you think, that’s just what I’ve decided in my head.”

“...Are you Coaku’s apprentice?” asked Ix, changing the subject.

“I told you, didn’t I? I’m his assistant.”

“Did he tell you my name?”

“Yep.”

“And did he tell you to meet me at the station?”

“I just did that because I was curious.”

“So he’s heard of me?”

“Yeah. But he doesn’t have to bring it up. Or do you want him to? If you do, I can ask him to.”

“...No, it’s fine.”

The conversation stopped there, and they ate in silence.

Riess sat with her knees bent, chewing away at some bread with her small mouth. Even though Ix had learned who she was and how she knew his name, she still had a mysterious aura about her. Why was she talking to him so much?

Around the time they were clearing their dishes, there was a commotion from inside the monastery. Ix hadn’t heard a bell ring, but he supposed the noise meant it was the end of lunch.

When he stood up, though, he heard a shout.

“Ah, so that’s where you ran off to! Why are you eating outside? You should have said something to me.” Shuno emerged from the back of the dining hall and headed over. “I was looking for you, you know. Thought you might be lonely.”

“You ate inside?” asked Ix.

“Yeah. All by myself in silence.” Shuno put their hands on their hips. “But anyway, could you hear the noise from out here, too? What do you think’s going on?”

“...I just thought it was the afternoon bell.”

“It wasn’t.” Shuno grinned. “Do you remember what Beter said? About the ghost?”

“What about it?” Ix tilted his head.

“The ghost showed up, is what I’m saying.”

“Huh?”

“Wow, it’s not often I see emotions on your face. I knew you’d be surprised.”

“No, I honestly just don’t get what you’re saying. Who saw this spirit?”

“Well, it’s not that anyone saw it... Right, I should start from the beginning,” said Shuno, playing with their bangs. “It just happened a second ago. I gave up looking for you and started eating lunch. The abbot, Coaku, and Beter were there, too. Since it was so late, they were the last three people to get their food. The thing is, there were only two servings left.”

“...And?” Ix furrowed his brow. “You can’t be trying to say that a specter took the food?”

“That’s exactly what they’re saying happened.” Shuno nodded gravely. “They prepare the exact number of servings they need for the number of people who are in the monastery. It’s impossible for them to be short. Which is why this quiet bunch is making a huge racket. They say there’s a ghost mixed in with the people and causing trouble.”

“They probably just got the number of people eating wrong. Maybe they forgot to include the guests.”

“That’s what I thought, too. But they insist they took all the visitors into account and made enough for everyone. Apparently, they’ve never once miscounted and made the incorrect amount of food.” Shuno held up a finger and continued. “Besides, there’s one other problem.”

“What’s that?”

“The lay brothers who ran off, the ones Beter told us about. They said they saw the ghost in the same place, in the kitchen. That’s the other reason everyone’s freaking out. The abbot’s trying to get the place back under control.”

Ix nodded now that he had the full picture, but he still didn’t think it was a real issue. It was just a couple of coincidences coming together, and no real harm had been done. Was a missing serving of food really something to make a big fuss over?

Unless...

Perhaps there's some legend about ghosts in the building or in town? That thought struck Ix. A city this old was bound to have a few tales.

But this was a monastery. They wouldn't allow such rumors, not openly at least, which could explain their reaction. When he thought about it like that, it made how Beter talked yesterday seem strange. Ix didn't have a single shred of evidence to back this up, though. It was just speculation.

If there was a local legend, Riess would probably know a lot about it. Just as he thought to ask her about it, he found that she'd disappeared from his side. She must have left after she finished eating.

"Hmm? You got something over there?" asked Shuno, looking confused as they peered beside Ix.

7

They were supposed to start working with Coaku that afternoon, but the man made no move to do any work. He just said, "Don't overdo it, you two," before sitting down in a cloth-covered chair near the fireplace. He didn't move a muscle after that. Since he was facing away from their worktable, there was no way he would be able to check their progress. Ix and Shuno kept shooting him glances, but his white-haired head remained bowed. What was the old man doing? The occasional snores they heard made it obvious that he was sleeping at least some of the time.

That was how their day passed. Coaku had given them neither words of advice nor warning. Rising to his feet in time with the evening bell, he said, "I shall see you tomorrow, then," and left, without ever even glancing at their designs.

The two apprentices had been wondering how harsh the craftsman's evaluation would be, but now they felt somewhat underwhelmed, or maybe a bit discouraged. "The heck was that about?" Shuno muttered spontaneously, standing there bewildered with Ix.

Coaku was exactly the same the next day. He didn't lift a finger. Ix and Shuno

discussed among themselves what they should do and agreed that the only real conclusion was to accept how things were and push on with the job. Pretending as if the silent elderly man wasn't there, they continued with their original plans.

Thus began their days of going back and forth between Estosha and the monastery.

Ix found the quiet of the monastery suited him more than he'd imagined. From the moment he rose in the morning to the moment his head hit the pillow at night, he thought of nothing but wands. Leirest was a pretty similar environment, but he had to do chores around the shop, since he was just a lodger there.

But here, there was nothing to get in the way of wandmaking. There was literally no background noise. He just needed to focus on the materials in front of him. Every wandmaker must have dreamed of crafting in a place like this.

Their work continued unabated for ten days, at which point the staff designs were complete. They hadn't aimed to finish at the same time, but as it happened, both Shuno and Ix finalized them in tandem.

Small problems cropped up during the design phase, as was to be expected, but Ix managed to draw on a combination of his experience and knowledge to work out all the kinks. Next, he would at last begin to actually craft the staffs. Not only did he feel confident from how well everything had gone until now, but he was also enjoying the assignment. That struck him as strange.

When he brought that up to Shuno, they looked at him inquisitively.

"What about that is weird?" they asked.

"Well, it's just..." Ix brought a hand to his mouth. "Wandmaking is a means to make a living for me. That's the only thing I can do. Obviously, I get excited when I see rare materials and I even sometimes get a sense of satisfaction from my work, but that's not why I do the job. So—"

"You're always so complicated," said Shuno with a sigh, turning back to their worktable.

Today as usual, they left the monastery and returned to the inn, where they

picked up their conversation in Shuno's room.

The floor was littered with detailed notes and writing utensils, so there was barely a place for the two of them to step.

"Forget about that—look here," said Shuno, holding out a scrap of paper they'd scribbled something on. "I finished fixing it. It's just like I said before. If you go along with this calculation, you can push down the transmission efficiency attenuation to two percent. It can have a more widespread application."

"You missed something important." Ix glanced at the note and pointed to one spot. "You can cut down on this waste so you don't have to worry about leakage. That should bring the attenuation down to one percent."

"Oh, you're right... No, wait. Can you really use it if you do that? Remember, we talked about this the day before yesterday..." Shuno got on the ground and shuffled through the scattered papers. "Huh? It's not here. Is it in the other room?"

"Who knows..."

While the argument they'd had on the day they met was trivial, their subsequent discussions had led to a variety of debates on all sorts of topics. The primary theme, however, revolved entirely around wandmaking techniques.

They chatted while walking to and from the monastery, while they were eating, and basically every other spare moment when they weren't working. Once they returned to their lodgings, Ix would find topic after topic he wanted to discuss, and he'd knock on Shuno's door. They would often come over to Ix's room as well. Neither of them could remember whose room was whose at this point. Both were equally messy, and since their debates continued until they passed out from exhaustion, they would sleep in the same room together every night.

Now that he thought about it, Ix realized he'd never spoken to someone in the same position as Shuno. Everyone in his life was either a craftsman one or two steps ahead of him or a customer. When it came to talking about wandmaking, he was either being taught or doing the teaching. This was his first time having a peer he could debate with on even footing.

Though it might be going too far to say they were on equal ground. Ix was keenly aware that he was the one learning more often than not. After being with Shuno for days on end, his belief in their genius had only solidified. Their imaginative capacity was leaps and bounds ahead of Ix's, and though the things they said sounded strange at first, they eventually made a lot of sense. How had they developed that mindset?

On the other hand, Shuno wasn't very knowledgeable about wandmaking theory for some reason. Or rather, you could say that they knew about as much as your average craftsman; it was just that Ix's volume of knowledge overwhelmed Shuno's.

"So, back to our previous conversation," said Shuno, looking at Ix.

"The one about bypassing the conduit? Or the one about variable techniques?"

"No, not those. The one where you said it was weird that you enjoyed crafting." Shuno rested their chin on their hands and glanced outside, where it was growing dark. The window was open. Their rooms were on the second floor, and they could clearly see the roof of the building on the opposite side of the street. "I guess that does happen—people become craftsmen even if it's not something they want for themselves. So you started working without any sort of reason or goal in mind, and you've just kept going. I guess you could call that strange, right?"

"Were you different? You weren't put into an apprenticeship when you were a child or anything, were you?"

"Me? I... Yeah, I decided to become an apprentice myself."

"Did you have a reason for doing that? Or a goal...? Like wanting to craft the ultimate wand or something?"

"The ultimate wand? You're bringing up Rednoff again?" Shuno frowned every time someone brought up that name.

But they were staying in Estosha, so Rednoff was bound to come up every once in a while.

"That was just an example. It's not like I think the ultimate wand actually

exists,” replied Ix.

“You don’t? Well, that’s interesting, too. I thought it was normal for all craftsmen, apprentices or not, to study as hard as they can because they’ve got the ultimate wand in their sights. Is that not the case for you, Ix?”

He couldn’t find an answer. He’d never considered it before.

Shuno was right—all craftsmen aimed for the ultimate wand. That’s why they polished their skills and increased their knowledge. But had he ever really thought of doing that himself…?

“But really, what *is* the ultimate wand?” asked Ix with a tilt of his head. “What would be the criteria by which you determine that? Function? Or the materials you use to make it? Say…if you forge a wand with a dragon heart, would that make it the ultimate wand?”

“A dragon heart? I didn’t realize you had some childish wonder in you, Ix,” teased Shuno with amusement before continuing. “You know, though, one thing that’s certain is that Rednoff was a genius. In those days, the era of natural wands, there was no such thing as a wandmaker, just woodcutters picking up branches. And magic was so weak that you’d barely even need someone to craft wands. Yet despite the conditions at the time, a single man found a way of recreating artificial ‘life’ in the sticks that had been cut. With the birth of man-made wands, craftsmen appeared, with the woodcutters becoming the first ones. I’ve said it before, but someone that good might truly have made the ultimate wand.”

“You really admire him,” said Ix.

“It’s not that I admire him. I’m just calling him what he is. Incredible.”

“But wandmaking’s already started to make distinctions between wands and staffs, and they each have their pros and cons. It’s theoretically infeasible to create a wand or staff that excels in all areas of casting.”

“Just think about it, Ix. It’s only been a couple hundred years since Rednoff created the first man-made catalyst. The techniques and tools we use to make things that have been around forever—like houses, swords, or fire—aren’t even close to their ‘ultimate’ form. If you look at wands in the long term like that,

don't you think someone down the line will come up with a revolutionary theory that we've got no chance of developing in our time? We can't conceive of it with our current understanding of things."

"But—"

"Besides, Ix," interjected Shuno, holding up a finger and smiling, "there's no point in speculating about what the ultimate wand would be."

"Why do you think that?"

"Well, defining the ultimate wand would be the same as making it, don't you think?"

Their flippant remark caught Ix completely off guard.

Shuno was absolutely spot-on.

But if that was the case...

"That's it..., " said Ix.

"Uh, what is?"

"The true nature of the 'ultimate wand' Rednoff left behind. For man-made wands to develop, you would absolutely need a buildup of theories, along with further innovation. The invention of various tools has allowed us to obtain quantitative measurements which, in the past, were gathered with our senses. This has greatly increased the precision of our craft. So if Rednoff did leave something resembling an ultimate wand behind, it wouldn't be an actual catalyst but rather its design. Perhaps it's not even as concrete as a design—maybe it's just the definition or idea of the ultimate wand."

"That's...a perspective I hadn't considered until now." Shuno nodded seriously. "Anyone's free to theorize about things, but no individual can brush aside the limitations of technology. Like, if you wanted to pass hundreds of flow lines through an area the size of your fingertip... You're right. You know what, I think you're really on to something. Come to think of it, it's really strange that a craftsman on Rednoff's level didn't leave any technical documents behind... That's fascinating. Ix, that's really, really fascinating!"

"Not like I have any proof for this theory, though..."

“But your idea is way more realistic than some baseless legend! Man, why didn’t I think of that...?”

Inspiration seemed to have struck, so Shuno grabbed a random piece of paper off the floor, then scribbled something in the margins. Then they gave a nod of satisfaction.

“Looks like our conversation veered off course all of a sudden,” said Shuno, peering over the sheet of paper at Ix. “Where were we before? Uhhh... Oh yeah. My goal as a craftsman, right?”

“Yeah, there was that,” said Ix in agreement, though he wondered why they had to go that far back in the conversation.

“Well, that’s, um.” Shuno crossed their arms. “I do have one, of course, but, hmm, should I tell you? I’ve never talked about it with anyone before.”

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.”

“But, I mean, you’re curious, aren’t you? I don’t mind telling you if you’re interested.”

“You sure? Even though you’ve never told anyone before?”

“But it’s you, so it’s different.” Shuno gathered up several of the notes on the floor and gently waved them about. “Besides, I think I’ve found a bit of a clue on how to work it out from talking with you. I’m not telling you this out of gratitude or anything, but—”

Just then, a strong gust of wind blew in from the window and snatched the papers out of Shuno’s hand.

“Ah!” They grasped at the air but couldn’t stop the sheets from flying out the window.

They went over to the window and saw that the notes had caught on a pile of snow. The pair could tell the papers were getting wet, even from a distance. The characters must have been bleeding so much, they weren’t even readable at this point.

“...I—I just looked at those notes, so I remember what was on them. I just need to rewrite them, okay?” said Shuno, slowly turning toward Ix. “A-are you

mad?”

“Doesn’t really matter. There wasn’t anything important on them.”

“Well, I think it was plenty important... Hmm? That person...”

Looking down on the street, Ix could make out someone in a dark-colored coat. Two people, in fact, walking side by side.

The person closest to their building was holding one of the pieces of paper. It was still dry. They must have caught it before it landed.

Shuno waved at them and shouted, “Heeey! Wait there just a sec—I’ll come get it!”

One of the pair glanced up at the sound of Shuno’s voice. The other person tapped them on the shoulder, and they nodded. They placed the piece of paper on the side of the road and quickly walked away.

“What...? It’s going to get wet like that,” said Shuno dejectedly. “They just needed to wait a second.”

“Must have been in a hurry,” supposed Ix as he watched the note that had been placed on the side of the road absorb water and slump as it lost its stiffness.

“Hmm? What’s wrong, Ix?” asked Shuno.

“What do you mean?”

“You look really spacey.” Their hands still on the windowsill, Shuno peered into Ix’s eyes. “Was there something really important written on that piece of paper?”

“That’s not it... It’s not important.”

“If it’s not a big deal, you can just tell me.”

“...I was surprised is all. I thought I saw someone I recognized.”

“Someone you recognized? A friend?”

“No, a customer. I fixed her wand over the summer.”

“Ah. Are you talking about the two people who were just here? But I couldn’t

see either of their faces.” Shuno blinked. “Are you sure your imagination wasn’t playing tricks on you?”

“Might have been. There’s no way she could be here now.” Ix shrugged. “Anyway, tell me what you were about to say. What wand do you dream of crafting, Shuno?”

“Huh? Oh yeah. Sure. Right, listen closely,” they said, sidling right up to Ix. “I want to make...”

A gentle snow began to fall, and the two looked up into the air, side by side.

“...What?” muttered Ix. Not because he hadn’t heard what Shuno said but because he couldn’t believe his own ears.

“I want to make a wand that lets you fly. Don’t make me say it again. It’s a bit embarrassing,” said Shuno with a pout.

“Fly...? Why...?” muttered Ix in amazement, but Shuno just looked at him in disbelief.

“Why...? Because it seems like fun.”

8

The building stood near the chapel. Both structures looked like they had been built in the same time period. Though the windows of the building offered a good view of the pointed bell tower, night had fallen. Now you could make out only its dark silhouette against the black sky.

Dozens of people were gathered in the room, but the chairs were set a decent distance apart, and the lights were quite dim. Though you could say a room that dwarfed a small number of people implied a level of grandeur, the fact remained that the occupants couldn’t see one another’s faces very well.

While there was a small gathering here, only about half of the people present were actually participating. The others were attendants or assistants. They were standing at attention behind their masters instead of sitting.

“Are you, sure?”

“About what?” asked Yuui Laika quietly back to the person standing behind her. All with a perfect smile.

“It’s not often, you see him. We had time, to say hello at least.”

“Were you aware of this, too, Nova?”

“This was, complete coincidence,” she responded in a voice that concealed all emotion, in the same way that her bangs concealed her eyes. “I was, surprised.”

“Who was the person who called out to us?”

“I don’t know.”

“And that piece of paper?”

“I don’t know,” replied Nova tersely. “It appeared to be, some sort of formula. It used symbols, I didn’t recognize.”

“Write down later what it said.”

“Yes.”

Just then, Yuui realized that all eyes in the room had fallen on her. She ignored them and took a sip from the drink she’d been provided. This was supposed to be a sign that she didn’t want to talk.

“That was quite the feat of athleticism you showed earlier,” came the voice of someone sitting diagonally from Yuui. It belonged to an elderly woman with dignity and a strong presence. “Catching a piece of paper tracing such an irregular path through the air looks simple, but it requires masterful control.”

Yuui heard clothes rustling behind her; she could tell that Nova had given a silent bow. In a way, she was acting as Yuui’s attendant right now. It was the master’s job to reply.

“We are honored by your praise,” replied Yuui quickly. “I take it you were watching, then?”

“It appears we occasionally pass along the same route,” replied Mellay, easily parrying Yuui’s jab before moving on. “I must admit to being quite curious about your attendant’s background.”

“I don’t believe this is the right place for that line of questioning,” insisted

Yuui.

“Ah, of course not. My apologies.” Mellay quickly nodded but then continued, as if appending a “however” to her statement. “There is nothing prohibiting us from forming personal connections through these meetings, isn’t that right? And to be honest, I am even more curious about the background of someone who has an attendant at such a young age. What do you say, Minaha?”

“I shall leave it to your imagination,” she replied, shrugging. Yuui was used to the fake name by now.

“How did you come to participate in these meetings with your entire body hidden behind a coat?” continued Mellay. “I get the impression everyone here wonders, just like I do, where in the world Seyoh found such an intelligent young woman. Some even whisper that you might be the Specter of Estosha.”

“A specter?” inquired Yuui, taken aback at the abrupt invocation of a ghost.

“Yes.” Mellay seemed pleased. “You can hear their voice and footsteps, but no one has ever seen them. It’s a local legend. Are you interested in it? But your lack of awareness means that this is indeed the first time you have set foot in this town. Your Central Standard is so beautifully pronounced, but—”



“Why don’t we leave it there, Mellay?” came the low voice of a man, another participant, cutting into the conversation. “You have brazenly pointed out that there are some unusual circumstances regarding Miss Minaha. What the old say in passing, the young take to heart. Or do you not understand that?”

“What a commendable thing to say, Gustavus. When did the man who was brought to court over interrupting a priest’s sermon become so gallant?”

“Not this again,” said Gustavus with a sigh.

“What do you think, Minaha? Why don’t you dine with me below the noon sun, just once?” proposed Mellay, turning back to Yuui. “Please don’t worry—I am not making an attempt to discern your true identity. I simply wish to have a nice long chat with you. It’s not just me; I’m sure anyone who invited you would feel the same.”

“That is not my concern,” said Yuui bluntly.

“Cold as always. But that’s fine for now. I’m not searching your closet for imra spirits, after all. I do wish for you to actively participate in the meetings, however. Though you have been ardent in your statements lately, which leaves me with little concern in that regard.”

“I understand what I am meant to do.”

“Then all is well.” Mellay nodded in satisfaction.

Just then, the door opened. The light from outside briefly illuminated the chamber but was immediately shut out. The flames in the lamps throughout the room all fluttered in the same direction.

A slender man had entered. His long hair was tied back in a single bunch. He was clad in a dark coat, the same as the other participants, but he took it off at the entrance and handed it to his attendant before approaching the small round stool at the center of the room. That was his designated spot.

A scribe wordlessly pulled out their writing instruments just as the man got up on the stool.

“The 933rd meeting will now come to order,” said the man quietly, with no prior introduction or explanation. “The fiftieth edition of the Standards of Faith

is scheduled to be distributed shortly. We are on track for submitting it to the spring conference without issue, but it goes without saying that there remain areas into which we must delve further. Do we require a recap of today's topics?"

The attendees shook their heads vaguely.

"Very well." The man nodded. "Additionally, I have an announcement to make before we begin our discussion. As was previously pointed out, we have no wandmaking experts among us. However, I have found an excellent solution to fill that gap, and they are planned to attend the next meeting, which will be the last of the year."

"It's rare to hear praise from you, Seyoh," said Gustavus. "Your playing up their quality leads me to believe they must be famous. Though the only one I can think of in Estosha would be Mr. Coaku Shtah."

"He unfortunately had a prior engagement," said the man, Seyoh, with a shrug. "But they were recommended by Master Coaku himself. They are a very suitable choice. I'm sure that everyone here knows the name of the most lauded wandmaker in the kingdom, Munzil Alreff?"

The crowd gasped, impressed. There was of course no one in that room who hadn't heard the name Munzil Alreff.

"But Munzil has already passed," noted Mellay sharply.

"That is correct." Seyoh nodded slightly. "They studied under him."

Yuui couldn't help turning around and glancing at Nova, who shook her head. *It's just a coincidence*, she seemed to be saying. Yuui decided to believe her, since even Nova wouldn't lie that brazenly.

Yuui turned to face front again and saw that the room was filled with quiet chatter.

"Studied under Munzil?" asked Gustavus again. "Forgive me for my lack of familiarity with his apprentices, but the only one of Munzil's students I am aware of is Layumatah, and she's based in the capital."

"Just as darkness blots the vision, so does intense light blind the eyes," said

Seyoh as he held a hand in front of his face. “I myself am not acquainted with all of Munzil’s apprentices, but many are hesitant to make themselves known. Their skills are excellent, but they prefer not to rely on their master’s name for work. There are few opportunities to meet with them outside of academic and military spheres.”

“Minaha seemed to know something about this,” noticed Mellay, suddenly turning the conversation toward Yuui.

“And so the girl gains yet another wrinkle. Acquainted with wandmakers, are you?” murmured Gustavus. He and Mellay were on the same page only at moments like these.

In a reserved tone, Yuui explained, “I have merely heard a few of their names.”

But this just seemed to solidify their hypotheses, in light of their previous statements. Whispers of “She knows more than one...?” spread throughout the gathering.

Yuui was frustrated that they’d misinterpreted her words again, though it was true that her relationship with Munzil’s apprentices went beyond having “*heard a few of their names*.” Her wand had been forged by the man himself, after all.

And when it had broken, Yuui asked one of his apprentices to repair it and even stayed at the shop of a different apprentice in the process. At that moment, it dawned on her that her relationship with Munzil and his disciples was more than superficial. Not that she had any intention of revealing that to anyone else at this point.

“Well, perhaps you know them, then,” said Seyoh in amusement. “I have heard that they are particularly knowledgeable about wands and that they always work as a pair.”

“There are two of them?” With that information, Yuui had no idea who they could be.

1

The meeting ended in the dead of night. Outside, darkness painted over everything. The majority of the participants and their attendants left the room, leaving only three people behind: Yuui, Nova, and Seyoh.

Yuui remained seated as she stared at Seyoh's back. He was blowing out each and every lamp. Almost all of them were dark, leaving only the one directly in front of her.

Once only one other lamp remained, Seyoh picked it up, flicked his bundle of long hair back over his shoulder, and walked up to Yuui. Amid the darkness, only he was visible, illuminated by the lamp in his hand.

"How do you find being here?" asked Seyoh.

"I can't relax," said Yuui honestly.

"You have my sincerest apologies for that," he said, bringing the light up close to his face. "However, I wasn't able to find any other suitable location to house you. There are no other buildings that I have my eyes on at all times, where I can guarantee your safety."

"I did not intend it as a complaint. You are providing me with room and board, after all." Yuui shook her head. "However, I don't understand why it is necessary to conceal where I'm staying. It seems like a waste of time for me to pretend that I'm staying somewhere else by going out before each meeting."

"Oh...?" Seyoh's eyebrows arched in surprise. "Yuui, I've arranged it that way based on advice from your own attendant."

"Hmm, is that true?" Yuui turned back.

"Yes," Nova replied with a nod.

"Hmm... Would it not be safer to stay secured in one location?"

“Currently, the greatest threat is an information leak, from the participants,” explained Nova. “This is the best way, to deceive them.”

“I would have thought there was a greater danger in my identity becoming known when I left.”

“My evaluation, is different. Very few people know you are here, Yuui. No, Minaha. People rarely notice, unexpected events. So long as nothing extreme happens, there shouldn’t be any issue.”

“I think you’re being overly cautious...”

Nova, however, didn’t seem keen on changing her mind. Instead, she just stared silently at Yuui, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with her.

Yuui did have some idea as to why Nova had grown this concerned. It probably had to do with the incident they’d been caught up in last fall, where a banquet was attacked and its attendees were taken hostage. Yuui and Nova had been there, too.

But the assailants hadn’t been targeting Yuui, and the two girls were able to resolve the issue. As far as Yuui was concerned, Nova was being too careful just because of one incident.

There was a knock on the door, and a servant brought in steaming food on a pushcart. They arranged the meal on a table near the two girls. At some point, Seyoh quickly sat down nearby, lifted a dish, and said, “Leave us be for a while.”

Nova started eating as soon as the servant left. She was still behind Yuui, however, so she could tell this only from the sounds of her chewing.

A servant brought them food on a pushcart twice a day. Most of Yuui’s time was spent in the chamber beside this meeting hall. In fact, she essentially spent her entire day there. Save for when she would leave and return for nightly meetings, she barely interacted with anyone. The only people she had to talk with were Nova and, on rare occasions like this, Seyoh.

At first, she’d been told it was a kind gesture from the lord of the town. It happened to be pouring rain on the day they were passing through, so they were lent a building that wasn’t being used at the time until the weather cleared. But after being kept there for an entire week with the same excuses,

Yuui finally realized that there was more to it than that. They weren't going to be able to leave Estosha until at least the end of winter.

Since Yuui wasn't in a position to be making complaints, her only choice was to accept the situation...

And yet..., she thought, her brow furrowed.

She couldn't very well accept the situation she was in if she didn't even understand it.

As Seyoh gracefully handled the dishes in front of him, he noticed Yuui staring at him. He smiled and asked, "What is it?"

"Are you still not going to tell me?" she asked.

"Tell you what?"

"The reason why I was brought here and made to participate in these meetings."

"You still need to ask about that?" Seyoh shrugged as if he didn't know what to say. "That is surprising. I have only ever told you the truth, that I borrow your insight."

"Then you would not have given me such a warm welcome. Now that I think about it, I should have realized something was amiss when you told me the lord was doing this out of the kindness of his heart."

"I swear that is the truth. Were it not for his generosity, we wouldn't be able to hold these meetings. We are solidifying the New Order's Standards of Faith, after all. Doing that in the capital is out of the question, and if the Old Order holds sway, it would mean we'd be unable to have a discussion out of fear of the death sentence. It is only with the protection of a powerful regional lord that we can do this."

"When you swear that to be the truth, does that mean that everything else is a lie?" asked Yuui.

"You are unrelenting," asserted Seyoh with a stiff smile. "It's just a manner of speaking, very common in conversations. Or are you that rigorous with your word usage? Perhaps you've become overly sensitive."

“Better than being oblivious.”

“A good response.” Seyoh nodded in satisfaction. “It’s that clear-mindedness of yours that I wish to borrow. A mind that was able to garner top marks at the Academy.”

“My scores were average.”

“I need people with keen intelligence and people with different perspectives,” continued Seyoh slowly. “Yuui, you have a sharp wit and are not a follower of Marayism. Someone like that is difficult to find, at least in the kingdom.”

“I wish you would give it a rest,” said Yuui.

She sighed.

Ever since she’d come to Estosha, she’d been showered with undeserved praise. Perhaps this was due to her age, or perhaps the fact that her true identity was hidden made her seem more significant than she really was. Whatever the reason, the comments were completely off the mark and left her feeling constantly uncomfortable.

“I understand how you feel. But even if I was to speak from a place of objectivity, the truth is clear. The Standards of Faith, which we thought were complete, have already been rewritten based on your comments. That is a fact.” Seyoh brought his hands together. “The Old Order has failed to put out a unified interpretation of their doctrine, instead leaving it riddled with inconsistencies. Though they may not make their voices heard publicly, there are many members of the clergy who have questions, even among those who are highly educated. That is why the New Order must make clear standards of faith and present logical doctrine founded in pure theological discourse. That will lead us to more followers. And those tenets will act as sturdy support when we begin our massive revolution. No matter how powerful the king is, it is the common clergy, along with the people they teach, who form the backbone of Marayism. *That* is why we need someone who is deeply suspicious of us like you.”

The New Order’s need of Yuui aside, that was essentially the background to what was happening.

Marayism was the kingdom's state religion, but there were many different interpretations of its scriptures and doctrine, which had led to a number of internal disputes throughout history. The current denomination in power was the Old Order, though naturally, they didn't refer to themselves as that. But now there was a new force vying for that power: the New Order. The sect's current plan was to infiltrate the kingdom, grow their follower base, and stage a peaceful revolution.

The meeting from earlier was just another component of that plan, a religious debate intended to bring together the New Order's arguments and solidify a unified doctrine.

Reforming the leading faction of an entire country without the use of force required a plan of immense proportions. Theologians and clergy members were invited from all over the country to participate in these meetings, which had been held continuously over the past five years with an ever-changing selection of attendees.

Currently, they planned to complete the Standards of Faith during the winter and submit them to the assembly the following spring. So why had Yuui been invited to join at this final stage? No, not invited—deceived and forced to take part.

Yuui Laika shouldn't have been here. She had originally planned to leave in the fall and spend a year in her home country of Lukutta, a small eastern nation that the kingdom had conquered.

She had been yearning to be in an environment where she could let her guard down even a little. Here in the kingdom, this was simply impossible, since she couldn't even walk around with her hood down. Though she no longer had family or friends in Lukutta, at least the people there shared her skin color. Yet, here she was, trapped in an out-of-the-way town in the far reaches of the kingdom.

It was those circumstances that kept Yuui baffled as to why she'd been invited to these meetings. She'd only been brought to this country in the first place because she was Lukuttan royalty. What she did know about Marayist theology and doctrine she'd only just learned in the two years she spent at the Academy.

Seyoh had provided her with a plausible explanation as to why she was participating, but she doubted that was the deciding factor. The long-haired theologian had to be hiding something.

“Hmm, I must say, you hold far too low an opinion of yourself,” said Seyoh as he wiped his mouth, having finished eating. “What I value about you, Yuui, is that you view things from an incredibly objective lens.”

“That has nothing to do with my abilities.” Yuui shook her head. “Any nonbeliever would be able to examine Marayism objectively.”

“That’s not true at all.” Seyoh smiled. “You see, people will inevitably subscribe to different religions in areas where Marayism isn’t practiced. I daresay they even have different gods. Your homeland, Lukutta, is the same, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is.”

“With that in mind, you would think people with different beliefs would attempt to denounce Marayism. Just as we denounce the religions of other areas. I’d assumed you would be particularly inclined to think like that.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” asked Yuui sharply.

“Oh no, I don’t mean anything by it.” Seyoh shrugged. “Anyhow, denial, just like agreement, is the furthest viewpoint from objectivity one could have. But you don’t do that.”

“Then allow me to denounce Marayism here and now. Your god does not exist,” Yuui enunciated clearly. “...How is that? Has that stripped me of value?”

“...Now then.”

Seyoh slowly stood, rubbed his hands together, and moved directly in front of her.

“May I ask you a question?” he inquired, his hands clasped before his chest. “Why do you believe God doesn’t exist?”

“There is no evidence your god exists,” she replied immediately.

“God created this world, life, and gave birth to humanity. The fact that we exist is proof of God’s existence.”

“You could make the exact same argument to prove the god of my land is real,” countered Yuui quickly. “How can the same evidence lead to two different conclusions? It can’t, which means it doesn’t support either alternative.”

“Precisely.” Seyoh nodded. “I believe they provide that argument at the Academy, don’t they? Although it might not be the most, um, logical.”

“That is not a counterargument.”

“It’s not, because I have no need for a counterargument.” He shrugged. “Because your original argument that there is no proof is a false counterargument in and of itself.”

“What do you mean?”

“You are the one who must provide evidence, Yuui. Do you understand?”

“That’s...” Yuui’s eyes opened wide. She immediately understood what he meant, but the argument came from an unexpected direction. “But...that is not an academic stance. You can’t demand I first give proof your god does not exist...”

“Is there any need to give proof of the sun?” Seyoh pointed to the ceiling. “The moon? How about the stars? I don’t think I have to go so far as to say it’s clear that they exist. But if someone insisted that the sun did not in fact exist, you would demand they provide proof, wouldn’t you, Yuui? That is what I mean when I say your argument is false.” He spread his arms slightly and looked at Yuui. “To us, God’s existence is obvious. We have no need to provide proof.”

“Your logic is circular,” pointed out Yuui in a calm tone. “Saying ‘God exists because God exists’ does not change anything.”

“Unfortunately, the same applies to you. You are simply insisting that God doesn’t exist because God doesn’t exist. Am I wrong?” Seyoh smiled.

Yuui looked down, her mouth shut. She needed just a bit of time to think.

Feeling someone approach, she looked up to see Seyoh had come closer to her.

“Yuui, you have acknowledged that our arguments are perfectly parallel. This

silence of yours was a few seconds for you to accept that, yes?”

“I suppose you could call it accepting, yes,” she agreed with a grimace. “Because they each carry the same level of validity, there is no point in further discussion.”

“And that is what makes you special.” Seyoh moved another step closer and placed his hands on the armrests of her chair as he gazed into her face. His face, covered in shadow, moved along with his words. “Most people are incapable of that. Even if they understand it, they cannot accept it. It is more common for people to think, *I’m still right*. Even I, as I say these things, believe I am right, that God does exist. Emotions come before reason. Yet, you are capable of easily throwing aside your own opinions and looking from a higher perspective. You treat the assertion that God exists and the assertion that God doesn’t exist as equal. Was there something that triggered such a holistic perspective in you?”

“Nothing comes to mind...” Yuui cocked her head.

She couldn’t remember any obvious event that would have triggered it; she’d just come to learn how little value her own thoughts had in the time she spent in the kingdom. Biases occur when you tried to force two things together, things that couldn’t understand each other. It was better to treat them as things that stayed beside each other.

“At any rate, it is that ability of yours to view even yourself objectively that led me to invite you. I believe that you will look at the situation from a higher perspective and see that you are not my prisoner,” said Seyoh with satisfaction before picking up the lamp and walking to the door. Just before passing through, he turned back and said, “If you like, you should accept Mellay’s invitation. There are a variety of opinions among us believers. I’m sure you will learn something.”

The door closed with a heavy thud. The flame in the single remaining lamp flickered before Yuui.

She sat in complete stillness for a while until Nova urged her to leave. Then every lamp in the room was at last snuffed out.

Her room had a single window, but all she could see out of it tonight was

falling snow hiding the sky.

Yuui was lost in thought the entire time until she fell asleep. First the thoughts were about God, but when she tired of that, she thought of ways one would prove the existence of the sun, moon, and stars. Lastly, she wondered when Nova slept, since she was keeping guard outside Yuui's room.

2

The meetings weren't held every day. Outside of those meetings, Yuui spent all her time in the room given to her, with nothing but books on Marayism. She had Nova to talk to, but she would disappear at times as well. Yuui didn't know what she was doing. When she was gone, the room was as silent as a grave.

But it was loud that morning.

A whole week had passed since the last meeting. Normally, breakfast would be delivered to Yuui around this time, but no knocks came at the door. She got out of bed and thought vaguely to herself about how it should be anytime now.

Outside the light was growing. The entire town sparkled from the light reflected off the snow piles that had grown over the night. Yuui liked the sight. There wasn't any snow in Lukutta. She hadn't gone outside much during her first winter in the kingdom, so she struggled to learn how to walk across the snowdrifts.

Peering out the window, Yuui listened to all the different noises that drifted to her.

There was the sound of a door opening and closing, someone walking quickly, a voice meant to be heard by others. The sounds continued through the morning. This was the first time anything like this had happened since Yuui had come here.

She didn't know how many people were in this building, but she guessed based on its outside appearance that it was used for more than just the meetings. Considering it was managed by the lord, she imagined it could be a public meeting place or some sort of government building. Its historical air was

the perfect decoration to show authority.

Outsiders who viewed her might assume she was of a significant position, considering she lived in this room, but that couldn't be further from the truth.

It wasn't the normal servant who brought food in the end. It was Nova.

"The servants seem busy, so I did it," she said as she closed the door and placed a bowl on the table. "Good morning."

"Has something happened?" asked Yuui.

"Yes." Nova nodded.

"What happened?"

"First," said Nova as she pointed toward Yuui. It was rare for her not to respond immediately.

"What?"

"Your soup, it's getting cold."

"Oh, I suppose that is true."

Yuui nodded and took the bowl.

Nova stared at Yuui, or at least that's what it looked like. Her bangs were in the way, meaning Yuui didn't know where Nova was looking.

But... Yuui stopped eating for a moment.

What did Nova think about her job?

Though she was currently acting as Yuui's attendant, her real assignment was to surveil Yuui while serving as her guard. Those two duties essentially amounted to the same thing, but it seemed absurd to be put in danger protecting the very person you were monitoring. Yuui wondered if her friend, who never showed her own will or emotions, might not be frustrated.

"An anonymous letter was delivered," said Nova abruptly, just as Yuui was finishing her breakfast. Yuui realized this was a continuation of their earlier conversation, but she needed time to swallow the last piece of bread she was chewing before she could respond.

“An anonymous letter...I see.” In other words, Nova was explaining that the delivery had been the source of the racket this morning. Now that Yuui understood the situation, she considered what she should ask next. “Who was it addressed to?”

“Seyoh, along with the lord of Estosha.” Nova’s lips were the only part of her that moved as she replied. “It seems it was placed outside the entrance, this morning.”

“What did it say?”

“That they would blow it up.”

“Blow what up?” Yuui cocked her head.

“This building.” Nova pointed toward her feet. “It also said it would end, the heretical meetings.”

“That’s not an ‘*anonymous letter*,’ that’s a threat.”

“Whoever sent it, claimed they were in the criminal group planning the attack. But that the closer the deadline came, the guiltier they felt, so they sent that warning.”

“So it’s a warning letter,” said Yuui as a filler comment before taking a sip of tea. “Am I right to guess you would like to leave this place immediately, then, Nova?”

“Yes.”

“Perhaps...” Yuui placed a finger on her chin. “You have already suggested this to Seyoh, and he refused to allow it?”

“Yes. He said it would be dangerous, to make unnecessary moves. He also said, the enemy could be trying to force us out of here, or that it was simply a prank.”

“There is some logic to his argument. A single letter is very weak evidence. We don’t even know if these people are our enemies at this point. If we are to believe what the letter says, they may actually be our allies.”

“At the very least, the enemy knows about the meetings,” said Nova, refusing to call them allies. “They know what is being discussed, where they are being

held, and who participates. And this is all, despite the fact the existence of the meetings has been, concealed. This is not just a prank.”

“No matter how hard they try to hide these debates, they’ve been going on for five years. The details might be hard to come by, but I bet there are many people who have an inkling about what’s going on. Perhaps the Old Order is feeling threatened by the Standards of Faith nearing completion and sent a fake letter to break down the meetings. That seems the most likely explanation.”

“I can see that, but...” Nova looked down for a moment, then faced Yuui again. “But if they were trying to prevent the meetings, it would have been more effective to send an anonymous tip to the central authorities than sending a letter here. Besides, I don’t see any point in preventing the debates, at this point. The Standards of Faith are almost finalized.”

“Which would mean...” Yuui stood. “Where is Seyoh?”

“I’ll take you.” Nova opened the door in a single fluid motion.

Yuui left the room, her coat on and hood already pulled down over her face.

They walked through the frigid halls of the building, no different in temperature from the air outside. Servants passed them a few times, but they always turned away when they did, acting as if they weren’t looking at Yuui and Nova. They’d been trained well.

None of the people they encountered were in any rush, as most of them were inspecting the walls or floor. Someone was even leaning out the window to chat with a person outside.

Yuui and Nova climbed the stairs, which crisscrossed twice as they continued to the top level. Seyoh’s room was at the back of the floor. It was the first time Yuui had been up here.

The door to his room was cracked half-open. Through the gap, Yuui could make out a maid whispering something to Seyoh, whose back was turned. Nova walked ahead of Yuui and knocked on the entrance.

“Ah, it’s not often you come to visit me,” he said, turning toward them and smiling.

The maid bowed and passed Yuui and Nova as she left the room, remembering to shut the door as she left.

“It seems you’ve already heard...,” said Seyoh as he gestured to a chair in front of him.

Yuui sat there. Nova remained standing in front of the door.

It was a small chamber. Facing the entrance were Seyoh’s desk and chair. There was also a chair for visitors, the one Yuui was using now, which was turned toward the desk. The walls were almost entirely covered by shelves lined with neat stacks of yellowed papers. The only sections free of shelving were the fireplace and the window, each casting different-colored light into the room.

“I am not underestimating the danger in any way,” remarked Seyoh gravely as he pulled out his chair. “However, I would like you to understand that regardless of the letter, this is the safest location I am aware of within the city. We are taking the utmost precautions with security, and the building itself is incredibly sturdy. That’s how it has persisted after so many—”

“Actually, I haven’t come to complain about your handling of the situation,” interjected Yuui with a slight smile. “I believe your decision is the logical one. If we panic and move locations, our security will almost certainly be compromised. It would be far more dangerous if we were attacked in that situation. Besides, the enemy would need the kind of firepower on par with a military-grade wand to blow up this building. It would be impossible for them to prepare something like that in secret.”

“My thoughts exactly. Additionally, I just received a report stating that there are no signs of intruders in town. I believe there is no immediate threat. I’ve explained the situation to the servants and allowed any who wish to leave to do so. Nevertheless, I will continue to reside here. I can handle myself.”

“Yes, and I hope that I may continue to impose upon your hospitality. It would be more difficult for you to spy on me if I was to relocate, after all.”

“Oh, come now.” Seyoh gave a pained smile. “You say such things every now and again, and your overly polite language only makes it sting all the more.”

“I know no other way of speaking.” Yuui shrugged. She had only been learning Central Standard for two years. “One damages themselves by constantly speaking too low of themselves.”

Seyoh nodded in acceptance. He clasped his hands together on top of the desk, then settled his gaze on Yuui. “Will you tell me the reason why you’re here, then?”

“Before I do, there is one thing I would like to ask.” Yuui held up a finger. “What do you make of this situation, Seyoh?”

“I am not in a position to be able to make judgments.”

“I don’t mind if it’s simply your personal evaluation—”

“I don’t have one. Putting my thoughts into words could influence the investigation. It is best in situations like this to distance ourselves from our preconceptions and consider every angle. If I had to give an opinion, it would be that.”

“Then...have you considered that the culprit could be one of our own?” inquired Yuui. Seyoh was silent for several seconds. Yet his gaze never wavered, instead staying firmly on Yuui as she repeated herself. “There is a possibility the threat is coming from inside. The participants of the meetings know everything about them, from where they are located to what they hope to achieve. They would have no difficulty sending such a letter.”

“Yes, of course I have,” said Seyoh, wording his answer deliberately. “Though I don’t like to consider it, I must not rule out the possibility. However, I do believe the probability of it being an inside job is low.”

“Why is that?”

“Because they wouldn’t have a reason to send the letter. What possible motive could they have for hindering the meetings? They came all the way to this city, heedless of their own safety, for the sole purpose of aiding the New Order.”

“What if—”

“Please don’t suggest one of them could be a mole for the Old Order,” said

Seyoh as he held a hand up to stop Yuui. “All the current participants have made immeasurable contributions to our cause. Simply refusing to attend would have done far more damage to the meetings than sending a threat letter.”

“I suppose...”

“Which is why you shouldn’t worry—”

“What concerns me isn’t anything important like that,” said Yuui as she got up. She slowly walked over to the window. It seemed like this room was almost directly on top of hers. The view was the same here, just from a higher vantage point.

The road in front of the entrance to the building was an unbroken sheet of white, save for a series of small footprints. She looked farther ahead and found two children running across the snow.

Yuui turned back to Seyoh, who had a questioning look on his face.

“No, what worries me is our current topic of debate,” she said, turning her eyes back to the window. “I know you would like to keep the discussions purely theological, but regardless of how the debate unfolds, or even if it comes to a deadlock, the revolution will have a massive impact upon the world. Both financially and militarily.”

“I am aware of that,” came Seyoh’s voice from behind her. “But—”

“I do not believe the current participants in these debates desire wealth or power. But even if they don’t, surely the people around them do. Those kinds of obstacles will appear whenever members of the clergy interact with the public.”

“And you believe that drove one of the participants to do this?”

Yuui didn’t answer. She returned to the window and watched as the children disappeared into the shadow of a building.

Voicing suspicions about other people was fairly difficult for her. Yuui had been taught from a young age that it was an incredibly dishonorable thing to do.

But...with so much on the line...

She turned back again and said, “I have decided to accept the invitations of Mellay and the others.”

“...Are you trying to discover who the culprit is?” asked Seyoh with a sudden smile, after a moment of silence.

“I do think there may be certain things I can learn from one-on-one conversations.”

“Yes, I think that’s a good idea. I have been suggesting you do so for a while now anyway, and I feel they’ll be more comfortable opening up if it’s you they’re speaking with.”

Yuui nodded in thanks and glanced beside the door. “Nova, is this all right with you?”

“Yes,” she said, nodding as she always did.

Seyoh bowed and told her he would make arrangements immediately. Meanwhile, Yuui and Nova walked back down the hall, passing a few servants on their way.

Yuui saw snow fluttering about when she looked out the window again and wondered how much would fall this time around.

She turned toward Nova, who was walking behind her at an angle, and said, “I’m sorry for making that decision without asking you.”

“It’s all right.”

“Will it inconvenience you?”

“I will go along with your decision,” Nova said. But after they descended the staircase, she asked, “What’s so important about the current topic, though?”

“The current debate?”

“As far as I can gather from what I’ve heard while standing behind you, it’s a discussion on people and beasts.”

“It is.”

“But you said it would have, financial and military repercussions.”

“Ah, that... That’s because of the topic that will inevitably come up when we

debate the current one. That will be an issue, which is why the participants have requested experts on the subject.”

“And what, is that topic?”

“Uh, well...” Yuui gazed at the ceiling, wondering how best to explain it. She stumbled upon a good explanation just as they arrived in front of the door to her room. “Simply put, it is the question of whether wands should come under central control of the church.”

3

The duo didn’t manage to make a trip out that day, but they did end up going to meet Mellay the next morning. They would be meeting neither at the church nor Mellay’s home, as she wasn’t a resident of Estosha.

The address they were given was that of a modest mansion in the city, squeezed between two tall buildings. Though “*modest*” may have been an understatement—it was still of significant size. Yuui would later learn that Mellay didn’t own the place and was simply borrowing it from an acquaintance for the winter.

Though snow was piled on the roof and windows, it had been neatly swept to the side in front of the entrance. It seemed Mellay was expecting company.

When they knocked, it took mere seconds for a servant to come to the door and lead them into the house without a single word. Their face was completely expressionless, though in a different way from Nova’s typical inscrutability, and their mouth was set in a firm line that never once opened. The servant seemed like they knew why the two girls were hiding their faces.

Normally, someone would offer to take your coat when you entered a manor like this, but that didn’t happen this time. Yuui had been hesitant to enter with her jacket on, since she didn’t want it to drip on the floor, but the servant didn’t seem to mind. They simply opened the door ahead and walked farther into the building.

“This is the person, who stands behind Mellay at the meetings,” murmured

Nova as they followed along.

“You can tell?” Yuui asked back.

“From the way, that they walk.”

The servant stopped momentarily, perhaps having overheard them, but immediately began walking again. Either that or they had determined the girls’ identities using the same method.

After passing several chambers, the servant opened the door to one. Instead of entering, they stood to the side of the entrance, their hands clasped as they looked at Yuui and Nova.

“Thank you,” said Yuui before she headed into the room.

They were greeted by the sound of a crackling fire. It kept the room pleasantly warm, but not stuffy. The furniture gleamed in the light. It all looked brand-new, without a speck of dust in sight. When Yuui inhaled, she caught a pleasant scent wafting from somewhere. This room was so comfortable, you would almost think spring had just arrived. It was like a completely different world from the world outside.

An old woman was standing in the center of the chamber.

“Welcome. Thank you for visiting,” she said as she spread her arms.

“Thank you for allowing us to visit on such short notice, Mellay,” said Yuui with a bow.

Obviously, she had never seen the old woman’s face. All she knew was the sound of her voice in that dark room. Even so, the moment Yuui saw her, she instinctively recognized that this woman was Mellay. She had her same air of dignity.

The door behind them closed quietly, and Nova stood beside it, like always.

Yuui turned toward Mellay, who stared straight back and asked, “Is this your first time meeting someone like me?”

“No, I’ve met one other,” replied Yuui as she adjusted her hood.

“Oh really? And is this person doing well?”

“Yes, though I haven’t spoken to them much lately.”

“I am happy to hear that one of my kin is doing well,” said Mellay with a couple of blinks. “At any rate, you must be surprised.”

“I know it’s rude to be, but...”

“Rude? Not at all. It’s to be expected. Women in the clergy are rare enough, but on top of that, I am the only vukodrak to ever attain this high a rank in the church. Unfortunate though it may be.”

Long silvery fur covered Mellay’s entire body. Fangs glinted in her jaw. She smiled gently at Yuui with her green eyes, but it wasn’t the sort of smile you’d expect from a sweet old lady. It was the sort of grin a powerful person makes when they know they have the advantage.

She was a vukodrak, a member of a species whose lands had been invaded by the kingdom in the past before eventually being incorporated into its domain.

“I’m afraid I can’t provide much in the way of refreshments, but I do have some tea and sweets. Please take a seat over there and make yourself at home,” said Mellay as she pointed farther into the room. “I’ll bring the tea; we can savor it together.”

Several chairs, their backs tall and covered with soft leather, had been arranged around the fireplace.

Mellay bowed slightly and left the room.

Yuui scanned the area as she softly stepped closer to the fireplace. She sat in a chair that faced the fire at an angle. Then she looked to her side and nearly stopped breathing in shock.

There was a person there. Two, in fact.

A pair of men were sat on a double-seated sofa right in front of the fire. Yuui hadn’t noticed them before because they’d been hidden from behind by the back of the sofa.

One of the men had his eyes closed, his mouth hanging half open. He looked like he was asleep. He was resting his head on the other man’s shoulder. Though this man appeared to be awake, he must not have noticed Yuui,

because he hadn't budged an inch. The light of the fire reflected in his eyes.

What surprised Yuui even more was that the two men looked exactly alike, in both face and build. Their slightly wavy blond hair and the construction of their features, what with their high-bridged noses, looked practically identical. Yuui couldn't tell what their eye color was, but she suspected they were the same. The only difference between the two was their expressions. The easygoing look on the sleeping man's face was the complete opposite of the severe look on his awake counterpart.

As Yuui stared at them, the sleeping man mumbled in his sleep and twitched before his breathing started to sound like he had woken up. Yuui saw Nova move out of the corner of her eye. She must have noticed the men's presence as well. She drew forward slowly, until she came around behind Yuui.

"Mm...mm." The man who had been sleeping half opened his eyes and stretched his arms out high toward the ceiling. He yawned as he turned his head side to side, where his eyes met Yuui's.

"H-hello..., " she somehow managed to stammer out first.

"Oh, visitors!" remarked the man in a clear voice. It was hard to believe he'd been snoozing a moment before. A huge grin appeared on his face. "Don't be so shy. We're visitors, too, so we're in the same boat! Hey, you don't mind that I dozed off for a bit there, do you? I mean, when I came to this room, it was so nice and toasty, you'd think it was made just for napping! Hey, Hemsley! You were awake, so you should be saying hello first. Or did you already do it?"

Yuui was taken aback by the flood of words coming from the man's mouth.

The other fellow, Hemsley, frowned and said, "Cram it."

"Now, now! All right, guess I'll do the introductions. This guy's Hemsley, and I'm Rolphie. Nice to meet you, person whose face I can't see!" he continued. "Did that old lady call you here, too? She's pushy, huh? I have no idea where she heard about it, but there was a servant standing outside our hotel the day after we were invited to the meeting. Man, this is the worst. I was planning on doing a whole lot of nothing this whole winter!"

"U-uh-huh..., " responded Yuui vaguely. "So you will be attending...that

meeting?”

“Oh, so you’re going, too? Yep, we are. Not like I asked to go, but they’re paying, so I can’t complain, I guess. Not much to it besides showing up and talking, yeah?”

Rolphie jabbed Hemsley with his elbow to elicit his agreement, but Hemsley just glared back at him.

In an attempt to cut off Rolphie, who seemed on the verge of babbling even more, Yuui asked, “You wouldn’t happen to be the wandmakers who were invited to the meetings?”

“Yep, that’s us,” he answered with a bob of his head.

“Which means...you were apprentices of Munzil?”

“Ha-ha-ha, I’d rather not hear that old fart’s name. Be careful, ’cause I’ll sock you the next time you mention him!” Rolphie smiled as he continued. “Uh...”

“Oh, I’m sorry, my name is—”

“Ah, it’s fine, it’s fine! To be honest, I don’t care about your name!”

“O-oh...”

“But you’ve got some guts mentioning that old fart in front of me! Speaking of, I’ve got a question for you. You,” he said, his eyes narrowing slightly, “have met other apprentices of his, haven’t you? Who were they?”

Yuui was left speechless before his direct stare. How had he been able to intuit that much from this conversation? Not that it could even really be called a conversation; it was more a one-sided stream of words.

But Yuui had seen enough of their mannerisms to be certain these two were Munzil’s apprentices. They gave off a very particular impression. You could say they had a peculiar air about them.

“It was a while ago, but I met Ix,” said Yuui carefully.

“Oooh, Ix the moron!” cried Rolphie loudly, then held his sides like he couldn’t stand how funny that was and said, “Did you hear that, Hemsley? Ha-ha-ha, Ix! The moron!”

“Be quiet,” demanded Hemsley bluntly.

“How’s that numbskull doing? Actually, don’t answer that. I couldn’t care less if he’s alive or dead!”

“So why did Mellay have you over?” asked Yuui, forcing a change in topic. She’d already realized there was no point trying to have a real conversation with this guy. “Have you heard what will be discussed at the next meeting?”

“What are you talking about?” Rolphie shrugged. “How the hell would I know what they’re going to talk about at the next debate or whatever? I don’t even know what these things are. I’m just going to answer whatever questions people ask me!”

“That...is...”

Yuui shuddered, impressed by how fast Mellay worked. She had already anticipated the issue that would be raised at the next meeting as well as the questions that would be asked of the wandmakers. That’s why she must have found them and posed the same questions to them beforehand. She would be at an overwhelming advantage next meeting if she already knew the answers.

“What exactly did she ask you?” inquired Yuui.

Rolphie jumped to his feet and exclaimed, “You’ve got some funny questions!” He stepped toward Yuui and held his right hand out to her.

“Um, what is this?” she asked, confused.

“My knowledge isn’t so cheap that I’ll just give it away for free.” He flashed a carefree smile. “I’ll tell you if you pay up. The going rate’s about...”

There was no need for Yuui to check her coin purse. The price Rolphie put forward was so steep that she would never be able to afford it.

Yuui shook her head, to which he shrugged with an “oh well.”

“All righty then. My nap’s over, think it’s about time we head back.” Rolphie pivoted away from her, then pulled up the other man by the arm. “Righty-o, see you later, uh... You know, I don’t care about your name! Right, Hemsley?”

“Don’t talk to me,” he snapped.

With that, the duo made to leave the room. Just then, however, Yuui suddenly called out to stop them. “W-wait a moment.”

“What?” Rolphie turned back only partway, showing his smooth features in profile. “We’re busy, yeah?”

“Did you speak with Mellay about what will be discussed next meeting?”

“Come off it. I don’t care about that.”

“If you’re a wandmaker, your interest should be piqued,” said Yuui slowly. “We will be talking about wands, after all.”

Rolphie cocked his head to the side and stared at her. His eyebrows came together in a questioning look.

After staying like that for a moment, there came the sound of a chuckle from deep within his throat. He was guffawing. His laughter grew until it seemed loud enough to rattle the building.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! What are you saying?!” He spread his arms and looked up at the ceiling. “I don’t have any interest in wands!”

“Uh...” Yuui was taken aback, while Rolphie laughed even more.

“I don’t give a flying flip about them! What I’m interested in is the massive profits that they bring! That’s it!”

“Wh-what?” Yuui would never have expected that kind of statement to come from the mouths of the wandmakers she’d met so far. It left her flabbergasted. “Wh-what about you, Hemsley? You are a wandmaker as well, yes?”

“I don’t care,” he spat back immediately.

“Ha-ha-ha, this guy, he’s the exact opposite of me. He’s only interested in stuff that comes before the wand!” said Rolphie as he slipped an arm around Hemsley’s shoulder. “He only ever thinks about the wood and trees we use to make ’em! A bit of an oddball, isn’t he?”

“I’m hot, get off me,” barked Hemsley coldly.

“Anyway, that’s just how it is,” said Rolphie.

“But...,” started Yuui, trying to stop them somehow.

Rolphie, who had already stepped out of the room, looked back and sighed in exasperation. “You still going on? If you’re about to ask if we’re twins, we’re not.”

“Oh, really?”

As she was unexpectedly brought back to her first question about them, the door closed.

Into the now-silent room stepped Mellay, a tray in her hands. “Oh, did they leave?”

4

For once, Nova didn’t taste the tea and sweets that were served to check for poison. She must have been cognizant of the fact that they weren’t served for her, and it would be rude of her to do so, considering they’d been invited.

“I hear quite the letter has been delivered,” said Mellay before Yuui could bring it up.

“What do you think of it?” she asked the old woman.

“I haven’t the foggiest. Who are they? And what are they after...? Even if the accusations were true, no one would benefit from such a violent act.”

“Sometimes people act illogically. Are you aware of what transpired in Leirest?”

“I am. And it was members of the New Order—our order—who were responsible. How foolish. What on earth did they think that would change...?” Mellay stared off into the distance. “You may be right that it’s the same now. If these meetings or I went up in smoke, it would amount to a tiny portion of the New Order disappearing. In the grand scheme of things, the attack would have zero impact. But perhaps it would bring them...hope. Hope to people who feel trapped.”

“Do you feel threatened at all?”

“Of course I do. But at my age, danger becomes a part of everyday life. I’m

more likely to meet my end by slipping in the snow tomorrow than being blown away with the building like the threat claimed.”

“While that may be true, it is a peculiar way of thinking...”

“What I mean is that the letter doesn’t particularly bother me. It’s probably best just to think of it as one of the ghost’s pranks.”

“Ghost...?” murmured Yuui. “You mentioned that before. An old tale in town, yes?”

“Oh, is that what you came to ask about?” Mellay’s eyes widened in surprise, and she chuckled. “I see... Indeed, if an old person like me was to tell a story while sitting in front of the fireplace on a day like today, then it should very well be a fantastical one.”

“Is it a well-known tale?”

“Unfortunately, I’m not too knowledgeable about it myself, but it is quite famous around these parts,” said Mellay. “Night after night in Estosha, you can hear voices, footsteps, groans, and screams. It does not matter if it’s in a mansion or in a small home; the sounds can happen anywhere. But there’s never anyone there. There’s nothing in the bushes, nothing in the attic... That’s what they say. It is supposedly the work of the ghost, slipping in unannounced. There aren’t too many mentions of the specter these days, but long ago, there were many people who claimed to have heard it.”

“When did these stories start spreading?”

“That I am not positive about... Though, thinking about the customs, I would guess it was around when Rednoff was here. It’s such a strange tale.”

That would mean this legend had been told for hundreds of years. Quite an old yarn.

And Rednoff...?

For a moment, Yuui wondered if the story had anything to do with wands. Her interest was piqued, since it would have been created around the advent of man-made magic catalysts.

Next, it was Mellay’s turn to change the subject. “I heard your conversation

earlier while I was in the kitchen. They're an amusing pair, aren't they?"

"Huh?" Yuui looked up. "Yes, I suppose you could say that..."

"Please don't misunderstand, I'm not trying to uncover your true identity," said Mellay as she placed her teacup back on the table and looked at Yuui. "But I must be honest, Minaha, I've become even more curious about you after hearing that. You've realized that the next topic of debate will be how wandmakers are handled after the revolution, haven't you?"

"It is the obvious conclusion based on the current flow of the discussion." Yuui nodded. "You went to the trouble of asking craftsmen here, after all."

"Most of the participants likely believe that is for a different and trivial point of discussion. Yet it is interesting, questioning a wandmaker in Estosha of all places."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, it's not important." Mellay shrugged. "So then, Minaha, how did you come to believe that wands would be an important point of discussion?"

"Because it is an issue of classification," said Yuui immediately.

"Yes, exactly." Mellay smiled. "This topic is particularly important to me. The scriptures only clarify a distinction between *humans* and magic beasts. But then what is it that separates us vukodrak from simple wolves? We must solidify a definition."

This was the topic they were currently debating.

To Yuui, the fact that the scriptures mentioned only humans was explained simply by the fact that it had been authored by them. But to the others, it was a serious dilemma.

The Old Order had their own general explanation for that.

"I thought that was already explained, that anyone who is capable of understanding Marayism is a person, and everyone else is a magic beast?" asked Yuui with a tilt of her head as she stared at Mellay.

"It's too narrow and contradictory a definition." The old woman shook her head. "If someone didn't believe in Marayism originally but became a follower

partway through their life, did they transform from a magic beast to a person? As the scriptures say, the whole world is the child of God. We must not spread mistaken interpretations of the scriptures.”

She rubbed her hands together and looked directly at Yuui as she said, “Even without forcing an explanation onto it, there is still one very suggestive depiction in the scriptures. You’ve realized what that is, haven’t you, Minaha?”

“The ‘five-legged beast.’”

Mellay nodded. “Do you know the details?”

“The two-legged beast knew God’s grace and thus created the third arm. In its jealousy of those people, the four-legged beast stole God’s arm and thus created its fifth leg. The beast was banished into eternal damnation...,” said Yuui, reciting the scripture from memory without hesitation. “Generally, the passage is a way of expressing how sinful it is to deceive God.”

“You are very well-read on the matter,” said Mellay as she clasped her hands together in glee. “In other words, the real demarcation is ‘whether or not they can create the third arm.’ That is the standard that separates us from beasts. If you analyze the scriptures logically, you naturally come to that conclusion. And, of course, we must interpret the ‘third arm’ as spells and, at the same time, wands. With that, history also makes complete sense, don’t you think? The ancient forest sages lived in the woods of the kingdom, and Rednoff, the person who invented man-made wands, was a kingdom citizen. The kingdom was the first country in the world to gain the technology needed to make wands *because of our faith.*”

“But that does raise another issue.” Yuui held up a finger. “With how important catalysts are... The Church cannot possibly leave the craftsmen who make them to run loose. Don’t you agree?”

“‘Run loose’ isn’t the most positive way to put it,” said Mellay with a pained smile. “But yes, you are correct. We cannot allow a technique God gifted us to spread so easily to other nations. Ideally, the Church would absorb the Guild. And I’m sure you know what would be required to do that, Minaha. That was the only thing I confirmed with that pair beforehand.”

Seeing Mellay’s smile as she spoke, Yuui realized that the old woman had

received the answer she'd been hoping for. That was why her next words weren't a question but a request for confirmation.

"There was no flaw, yes?"

"No, there was not. Making wandmakers members of the clergy would not cause any hindrance. That allows us to wrap up the scriptures without contradiction."

Yuui had predicted this was exactly how things would go. That was the only possible way of sorting things if the scriptures upheld wands as holy objects. At the very least, that was what Mellay was going to lead the meeting to conclude.

Yet, Yuui still considered it strange.

If you thought things through logically, you would arrive at the conclusion that wandmakers would have to become part of the Church. That's how Yuui was also able to hit on the answer. She didn't know how wandmaking would be adjusted to conform with the scriptures, but that wasn't the issue.

The issue was everything outside of Marayism. Wands were high-value items, and a massive market, encompassing everything from procuring their materials to selling the actual product, had developed around them. The majority of buyers were nobles or powerful merchants, people with influence. And when you considered the fact that wands were also used in the military, the question of wandmaking extended all the way out to the country's security. Mellay had suggested that the Church would absorb the Guild, but things weren't that simple. It would take a while for the Guild to be integrated into the Church. And even if that could be accomplished, it would have huge ramifications on the kingdom and its citizenry.

But based on Mellay's tone, those issues seemed to be none of her concern. It was almost as if she thought everything besides consistency with the scripture was irrelevant.

Yuui had hoped to delve further into the topic with Mellay, but the old woman didn't seem willing to show her hand any more than that. She smiled as if to say they would continue that discussion at the meeting, then steered the conversation to trivial gossip.

Yuui and Nova left Mellay's mansion before noon. She'd offered them lunch, but Yuui politely declined.

"Is it, for Ix?" asked Nova suddenly as she walked behind Yuui on the way back.

"Huh? Is what?" she asked, turning back.

"Is he why, you're so concerned about this?" continued Nova, her expression as blank as ever. "If being a member of the clergy is added as a requirement for being a craftsman, that would be quite hard on Ix. Is that why, you're trying to prevent it?"

"No... I think you are reading too much into this." Yuui shrugged. "You should know, you've been with me for this long. I am a simpler person than that. My only real motive is to help people if I see them in need."

"Is that, so?" Nova nodded slightly, without indicating whether she'd accepted Yuui's words or not.

The noon bell rang. It sounded incredibly loud because they'd made it back far enough to be close to the Chapel. Yuui had long grown used to it since coming to Estosha. A high-pitched tone echoed across town as the bell chimed, a significant pause hanging between each note. Even the air seemed to tremble as if numb during this time.

As the third note rang out, Nova suddenly came up from behind Yuui. She grabbed Yuui's right hand and pulled her forward.

"What is it?" asked Yuui.

She could see Nova's mouth moving, but she couldn't make out what Nova was saying between the clangs of the bell. Giving up, Nova shut her mouth and pulled Yuui around a corner.

The fifth note rang out, and since they had gotten closer to the Chapel, it sounded even louder.

They immediately turned another corner onto a wide road. Nova stopped and pushed Yuui against the wall of a building. She brought her mouth to Yuui's ear and began to speak, but the other girl still couldn't hear anything. Nova shook

her head.

The bell rang again.

Yuui touched the wand inside her pocket. Nova wasn't the kind of person to do something without reason. She'd likely sensed danger. Someone following them or an assailant. With how urgently the girl was acting, the latter seemed very likely. Nova hadn't struck back because she wasn't sure how many enemies there were.

Ahead of where Yuui was looking, the snow at the base of the corner they'd rounded a moment earlier burst into the air. It flew skyward in a wide area, turning to mist and revealing the ground below.

Since the sound of the bells had smothered the noise of the spell, this looked as though it had played out without a single sound.

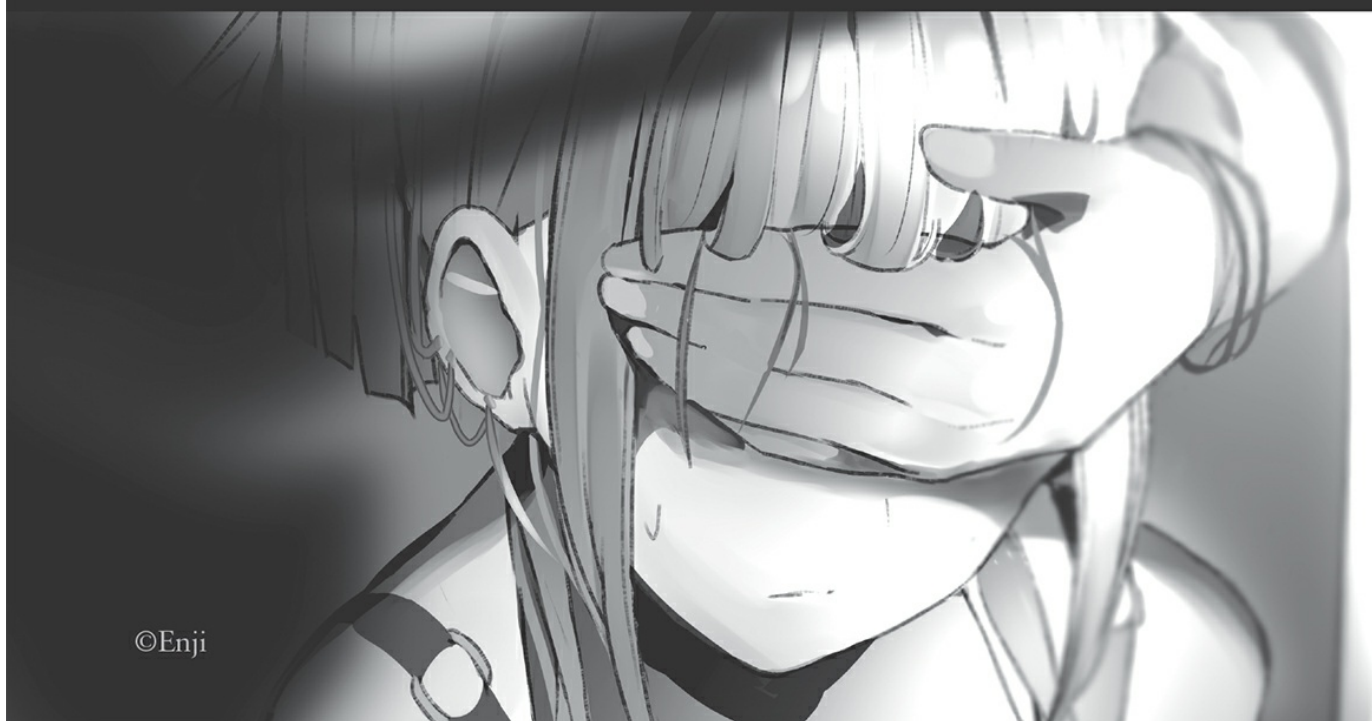
Yuui moved on instinct, but Nova held her back.

That's when she realized their assailant had lost sight of them.

But the attacker was casting such daring incantations. Yuui and Nova couldn't just hide to deal with this kind of opponent. If they weren't going to launch a counterattack, then their only option was to flee.

Farther down in the direction they were facing stood the building where the meetings were held, which would be their best option from a defensive standpoint. But Yuui was concerned the enemy would tail them and discover where they were living. Nova shared the same uncertainty.

Snow erupted into the air again, this time exposing the ground directly in front of them. Clods of white struck their faces. The enemy was closing in.



Nova put her hand in her breast pocket and pulled out her wand.

Then she leaped out into the middle of the road in time with the chime of the next bell.

It was a split-second decision. Yuui jumped right behind Nova. She slipped her hand around Nova from the back and covered the girl's eyes. Yuui squeezed her own eyelids shut tight and pointed her wand toward the sky.

The white flash was so bright, it still dazzled her through her eyelids.

Immediately, she lowered her wand and removed her hand from Nova's eyes.

For a brief moment, Nova looked like she wanted to say something, but then quickly took Yuui's hand and plunged into the mist of snow they'd created a moment earlier.

Yuui didn't know if her plan had gone well, but she assumed that the enemy had been focusing on Nova the moment she leaped out from her hiding spot beside the building. If the light she'd produced met their eyes, they would be temporarily blinded.

The enemy had blasted the snow into the air to conceal their own approach, but that was now working in Yuui and Nova's favor. The snow would conceal their footprints once it fell back down.

They made it back to their home building, nearly slipping and falling several times on the way. The pair burst into the entrance, out of breath, and the servants regarded them with furrowed brows as they passed through the hall.

5

Yuui and Nova informed only Seyoh about the attack.

He told them he would go investigate where it happened, but it seemed to be a dead end. A few days later, he showed up, shoulders slumped, to reveal that he hadn't turned up anything. Not a single clue. After this, he informed the other participants in the meetings and warned them to be cautious. The enemy's motive was still unknown.

Anyone would guess that the person who sent the threat, or the group that person belonged to, was responsible for the attack, but that was unlikely.

Yuui thought it over several times, but all she found were questions. Who would stand to gain from eliminating her? She was the least important person in these debates. And the fact that they'd come after her in broad daylight made it difficult for her to believe they had any real intention of killing her.

Though Yuui had been invited to speak with some of the other participants besides Mellay, there was no way she could accept them after this incident. In the end, she spent every day like she had before—holed up in her room, bored.

During one of those days, she learned that Gustavus, another meeting participant, was close by. Seyoh visited her room to tell her.

"What do you mean by that?" asked Yuui.

"He's at Estosha Chapel," he replied. "What will you do? Are you going to meet him?"

"What do you think, Seyoh?"

"Would my opinion have an impact on your decision?" he asked, raising his eyebrows in surprise. "I will neither force you to go nor stop you from attending. I have tried to maintain the same stance ever since I invited you here."

"What about you, Nova? Do you think it is much of a risk?"

"The Chapel is right across the street, and many people are, gathered there. I think, there is no danger of attack," she replied flatly.

"Would you like me to accompany you?" asked Seyoh.

Yuui declined and went with Nova alone.

The early-winter sunset was approaching. The sun dipped down, slowly changing the color of the sky. Unlike usual, however, an atmosphere of excitement was wafting through the street. Large groups of people seemed hard at work around where the Chapel was located.

As they entered the grounds, Yuui and Nova came across a group of people wearing clerical vestments. There was a pile of what looked like construction

materials on one section of the ground, which the workers were carrying around. Several of them were building something. They seemed to be engaged in some sort of construction work or preparation.

One of the people who happened to be near Yuui and Nova noticed them and drew closer. He was a boy with freckled cheeks. When Yuui told him they'd come to see Gustavus, he ran into the Chapel.

Not long after that, another person in clerical garb emerged from inside the building. He was a middle-aged man. His hair was thinning slightly, and he wore a warm smile on his face.

"You must be Miss Minaha, correct?" He spread his arms out as he walked toward them. He sounded just like the Gustavus she'd heard in the meetings. "I didn't expect we'd meet in a place like this, though."

"I was passing through and thought I would drop by to say hello," said Yuui, bowing.

"It's cold out here. I wish I could invite you inside, but the Chapel is in the middle of preparations right now... My apologies."

"That is all right—here is fine. I don't plan on taking too much of your time."

The three of them moved to a section of the Chapel grounds. Nova stood a slight distance away, scanning the area.

"Now... I'm glad you've come. I've been hoping to have an opportunity to speak with you like this," said Gustavus as he rubbed his hands together.

"I have as well," said Yuui.

"Ah, you've met other participants besides me, haven't you? I mean, outside of the meetings, of course."

"I spoke with Mellay."

"Mellay... I see." He grimaced momentarily. "Though, yes, that isn't surprising. She is the most prominent participant in the debates. Speaking with her first would be the right way to do things."

Yuui was aware that Gustavus was the only person who directly opposed Mellay in the meetings. She couldn't help but notice that he always spoke

without hesitation toward her, despite their slight difference in age.

Whenever Seyoh brought up an issue, Mellay and Gustavus would plead their cases, while the other participants expressed support for one side or the other. That was the normal flow of the debates. Mellay would often point out inconsistencies in Gustavus's positions, which meant she would come out on top, but that didn't change the fact that the pair comprised the core of the meetings.

That was why Gustavus had been one of the participants Yuui was most eager to speak with, along with Mellay.

"What is everyone doing right now?" she asked.

"Hmm? Oh, preparing for the festival," said Gustavus.

"A festival around this time... That would be Heaven's Worship, yes?"

"Indeed. The current plan is to hold the festival on the same day as the next meeting. I would love for you to attend as well, Minaha."

"Ah... I will consider it."

"Oh, don't be so strict. It's not like other festivals—there's no alcohol or food going around. It's a small event that doesn't need any fancy equipment or special rituals. All you need to do is go outside and gaze quietly up at the sky. That actually means the work we're doing now isn't strictly necessary. There are just a few odd jobs we need to take care of, since so many people will be coming to the Chapel."

"Gustavus, is this city your home?"

"It is for now. I'm close with the priest of Estosha. He sometimes calls me over and makes me do things like this."

"But I thought the priest of Estosha was Old Order? And the New Order dislikes these sorts of festivals and events, and normally it should be the monks who come to assist, yes?"

The monastery was an Old Order institution, which would be eliminated when the New Order took power. That was because one of their core beliefs was that the average citizen could accomplish in their daily lives what the monks were

doing at the monastery.

When Yuui spoke, Gustavus suddenly laughed.

“That sounds like something Mellay or Seyoh would say. I see, so you’re that kind of person as well, Miss Minaha.”

“That kind of person?” asked Yuui, her head tilted.

“An academic type. A clerical person like me can’t think like that.”

Yuui suddenly looked around and saw that the monks who were working were glancing their way. They seemed interested in her, this mysterious figure who’d suddenly appeared to engage in a lively discussion with Gustavus. It wasn’t surprising, considering her face and general form were concealed. They probably hadn’t realized she wasn’t even an adult, and they definitely hadn’t clued in to the fact she was an easterner.

Gustavus held up an open hand toward them and smiled.

“I have been a member of the clergy in cities for a very long time now. I only have what I know. Instead of staying in one area, I went to all sorts of different places whenever I was told to. I’ve met many priests and the people who listen to them. And what I’ve come to understand is that theory is not compatible with practice. The academic type may tout their theory, but the clerical type follows practice,” he said, explaining what he meant by clerical. “Of course, theory is still important, in both doctrine and theology. But it is convincing only to a handful of people, namely the clergy and theologians like us. This in no way means that the average person is a fool. Rather, it means that even if most people understand theory, they require a massive amount of knowledge to find it convincing. They don’t have the time to learn all that. Do you get what I’m saying?”

“I think I do...,” said Yuui vaguely with a nod.

“Let me give you an example. Something we’re often asked is, ‘Why doesn’t God fix the world’s misfortunes and absurdities? Why are honest and good people so mistreated while evil people are so prevalent?’ So then, Minaha, how would you answer these questions?”

“I would say that humans are incapable of understanding God,” responded

Yuui immediately.

“That’s theory,” said Gustavus, his breath turning white. “Humans, whose knowledge is limited, couldn’t possibly understand the will of our omniscient Lord. The fact that we ask ‘why’ is in itself proof that we don’t understand God. And that answer would satisfy Mellay or Seyoh. It’s the correct answer from a purely theological standpoint.”

“I see... Ordinary citizens certainly wouldn’t accept the response I just gave.”

“It’s a given. The people want an explanation, not theory. They’ll assume that if they can’t understand God, they don’t have to follow the teachings. But that’s a problem for the priests who are meant to teach and guide them. And that’s why people try to come up with some sort of explanation. Such as, ‘Take joy in your poverty. The richer you are, the closer you are to corruption, and the more you will be tested.’ Theoretically, that’s incorrect. But we give that answer because it’s necessary in practice.”

Gustavus’s stance in the meetings finally made sense to Yuui.

What Seyoh and Mellay were after was a purely theological argument. They were focused entirely on the scriptures, so their field of view was rather narrow. That was precisely what allowed them to make clear assertions about their stances, which in turn allowed them to easily gather support from the other participants.

Gustavus, on the other hand, was approaching the debate from a wider vantage point. This inevitably made his arguments vaguer and created contradictions. Even if his position matched the real-life application of Marayism, it was disadvantageous in a debate setting.

“I can’t go saying this too loudly,” said Gustavus as he lowered his voice, “but I’m not that optimistic about the New Order’s current policy. Obviously, I agree that we need to pull together clear doctrine, but it will absolutely diverge and become distorted once the revolution comes. It’s easy for the New Order to say they’ll abolish the monasteries tomorrow once they gain power. But what about the monks who actually live there here and now? The fact is, even if you’ve got your perfect armchair-theory revolution, it won’t be that simple to actually execute it. I am well aware of that.”

He brought his hand to his mouth and gave a wry grin as he said, "Listen to me now. That's enough to make me sound like I'm the one who sent that threat letter."

"What do you think about that, Gustavus?"

"Ah..."

Some pickets were being put up on the Chapel grounds. Four or five men got in a group, counted to three together, and placed them into the earth.

Yuui guessed it was probably a bonfire. Heaven's Worship was held at night. It would be dangerous to have crowds of people gathering in the dark.

The men smiled at one another. Their project had gone well. A few of them looked up at the sky. Yuui followed their gazes, but at some point, gray clouds had filled the sky, concealing even the sun.

"I think the threat is meaningless, regardless of whether it is part of a real plot or if it is just a prank. From a theoretical standpoint, at least," said Gustavus gravely. "But this is reality. In the real world, meaning is found only within the individual. We shouldn't take the letter lightly. Since these meetings are being kept under wraps, there's a high chance it came from someone on the inside. You suspect as much, don't you?"

"Ah, well, I..." Yuui fumbled for her words.

"It's fine. It's just, this sort of situation makes me feel like speaking my mind. I'm sure Mellay is the same."

After that, they made some small talk.

Though she hadn't asked Gustavus about this in detail, Yuui was certain that he would oppose Mellay at the next meeting. Though having wandmakers become members of the clergy might not have been inconsistent with the scriptures, it was infeasible in practice. He wasn't the sort of person to let that slip by.

Gustavus walked Yuui out of the chapel grounds. Just as they were saying good-bye, she happened to remember something and asked, "Gustavus, have you heard of the Specter of Estosha?"

“Hmm? Did Mellay tell you about that?”

He explained the ghost stories to Yuui. His account was largely the same as what Mellay had told her, albeit more detailed. When Yuui asked Gustavus how he knew so much about the tales, he told her there was a book that recorded testimonies of the people who claimed to have heard the ghost’s sounds.

“That is incredible... Where can I find this book?” asked Yuui out of sheer curiosity.

“Seyoh has it right now,” said Gustavus with a nod. “It’s not particularly interesting from a narrative perspective, but it’s fine reading for staving off the winter boredom.”

“Yet it seems somewhat strange that these ghost stories would spread across the entire town...,” she said, bringing a hand to her cheek. “Almost as if there are people who truly believe them.”

“Ah, well...,” said Gustavus, a strange expression on his face for some reason.

“What is it?”

“No, it’s just, the ghost stories of this town aren’t completely ungrounded in reality. They’re just tricky for followers of Marayism to talk about. People avoid telling them aloud, so a lot of people have forgotten them...”

He looked side to side, checking they were the only ones there.

Then he whispered, “Dragon.”

“Huh?”

“Once, a dragon appeared near Estosha and created life with its magic. That is the specter. That’s the legend from way back when.”

“About how long ago was that...?”

“It’s just a tale.”

Yuui wanted to ask for more details, but Gustavus said he’d see her at the next meeting and cut off the conversation.

“You’d better go home soon. With these clouds, it looks like we might have a blizzard,” said Gustavus as he pointed to the sky.

As Yuui stared at Gustavus and the clouds moving quickly across the firmament, she suddenly remembered people talking about how the sky was always clear on the night of Heaven's Worship.

6

The clouds had looked menacing since the night before, but Ix and Shuno paid them no mind as they walked to the monastery.

But the snow and wind grew stronger in the afternoon, turning into a violent blizzard before they knew it. Earlier in the day, they'd stepped out to check the weather, and it still seemed fine, but when next they went outside, everything was coated in white.

Ix stared out the window as he swept up the wood fragments on the floor.

He thought about how it was white both inside and out.

Life here was pure white.

Nothing of note ever happened. He woke up at the same time every day, did the same work, ate the same food. There was no color. Like a canvas painted with white.

In reality, three weeks had passed since he and Shuno had begun making the staffs. Ix hadn't even noticed it until he counted the days. Each had gone by so fast.

The job was going well. In fact, it was going significantly faster than normal, probably on account of the environment. It had been a while since he'd carved wood, but it was as pleasant as ever.

Both Ix and Shuno had already become a part of this small world. They came at the same time every day and continued their work in the same room. Even problems and their solutions were worked into their daily existence.

"You two are practically one of us," said Beter once.

"What do you mean by that?" asked Shuno in response.

"I just thought you seemed like monks. I can tell that both you and Ix are

really devoted to your work. The only difference is that you don't live in the monastery."

"You think so?" asked Shuno as they tilted their head. "I've never studied Marayism, though."

"That isn't a joke. I'm mostly serious," he said, dropping his voice low. "Ix, Shuno, I can make some introductions for you at a monastery if you'd like."

"Why are you bringing this up all of sudden?" asked Ix in surprise.

"When someone isn't suited to life in the monastery, they're completely mismatched. I've seen so many cases when someone comes in and leaves a few days later, or even that very same day. But then there are people who grow accustomed to this life. Even if they have to leave for some reason, they always come back. I can kind of see that personality in you two... Sorry if I'm too much of a busybody."

The conversation ended there, but as Ix thought back to what Beter had said a number of times since, it struck him that his client Yuui had also said something similar to him.

She'd told him craftsmen were like devout believers.

Now Ix was starting to think she might have been right. His lifestyle aligned with the monks'. Or perhaps it was better to say they led his ideal lifestyle.

But there was one critical difference. The monks worked to please God—that was everything for them.

But what about him?

For what purpose did he make wands?

It was a question that had plagued Ix ever since that day.

That day, that evening.

Ever since Shuno had revealed they wanted to craft a wand you could fly with.

They were already thinking through the theory needed to make it and would surely accomplish it someday. Or at least they had said as much, their expression full of excitement as they did. Ix had thought up a concept for that

type of wand but immediately gave up on it.

Considering this hadn't made him feel like Shuno was a genius.

Instead, it forced Ix to realize that he'd been arrogant for believing he was on Shuno's level.

They were a craftsperson in an entirely different league.

So then, what should he do?

Long ago, his teacher, Munzil, had said that Ix had a talent for making catalysts. He said that because he had lost magic, he could step outside of a wand. But Ix knew that he hadn't gained any ability in exchange for his magic.

He could never forge the ultimate wand, or a wand that soared through the sky.

Was he just going to keep cranking out wands to make a living?

His whole life? Without any goal?

And that led to...

White.

If that was what his life was going to be, then maybe there would be some point in going into a monastery, reading the scriptures he was so unfamiliar with, and making catalysts for God. That was where Ix's mind was going.

As Ix stared outside and mindlessly went about his work, Beter came into the workroom.

"We've readied your lodgings," he said.

"Thank you," said Shuno as they turned around to face Beter, a broom in their hands just like Ix. "Sorry, we would've gone back to our hotel if the blizzard had let up just a bit."

"No, you wouldn't have to go to that trouble..."

While they did have the no-women rule in the monastery, that wouldn't change the weather. That noon, the two apprentices had been informed they would be allowed to stay in the monastery for the night.

“Oh, by the way, listen to this,” said Beter, his expression quickly changing to the innocent smile of a young boy. “I went to Estosha Chapel yesterday.”

“Oh, that’s good,” said Shuno with a smile. “You’ve been saying for a while you wanted to go. Were you running errands?”

“Yep, I went to help with preparations for Heaven’s Worship. It really had nothing to do with me; the abbot just happened to ask me to take care of it... But it was incredible,” said Beter, his eyes closed, overcome with emotion. “You’ve seen it before, right, Ix?”

“I only really saw the bell tower from the outside,” he replied.

“The facade is incredible, but the interior is marvelous. I’d been meaning to take a look ever since coming to Estosha.”

That’s right. While Ix had thought nothing in their lives had changed here, there was one thing that had: their relationship with Beter.

In the beginning, the pair had talked to him only when necessary or explained things about staffs when he asked. But at some point, their relationship developed to the point where they would just chat without pretext. They’d gotten into a routine of talking like this once they finished working. There weren’t many people as young as him in the monastery, which was probably why he’d taken a liking to them.

“But yeah, I was in charge of stuff outside the Chapel but just happened to get a chance to go inside. I got a whole lifetime’s worth of looking at it,” he continued, seeming quite fulfilled. “But I didn’t find the underground room. Guess a story’s just a story.”

“Story? Is there something in the Chapel?” asked Ix.

“Oh, you don’t know?” Beter scrunched his eyebrows in surprise. “Huh... I guess that makes sense, actually. It’s not something you tell outsiders. Though it does sort of have something to do with wands.”

“Well, now I’m interested,” said Shuno as they listened. They leaned their broom against the wall and took a seat. “Tell us, Beter. Is there an underground chamber there?”

“Uh, well, I guess it should be fine to tell you two. It’s not that big a deal anyway,” he said with an uneasy grin. “One of the older monks told me this... Apparently, when the Estosha Chapel was being constructed, the lord of the city at the time summoned a particular wandmaker and told him, ‘I want you to make the ultimate wand to fortify the protection of the monastery.’ Relations with the neighboring country weren’t good at the time, and it seemed that they might be engulfed in war at any moment.”

“Huh? That’s—” murmured Shuno.

“Let Beter finish first,” urged Ix.

“The craftsman refused initially, so they imprisoned him for a fabricated crime. They shut him into an underground room under where the monastery is—though it hadn’t been built at the time—and forced him to make the wand.”

“Urgh, this isn’t a happy story.” Shuno grimaced. “So did the craftsman finish it? Or was he executed or something?”

“That’s the interesting part,” said Beter, his fists clenched in excitement. “When they opened the door to the underground chamber again, *all they saw* was a single wand.”

“All they saw... So then, the craftsman...?” Shuno cocked their head.

“Obviously, there was a divine miracle. He hadn’t failed in his trials—he was allowed to slip away for crafting a wonderful wand.” Beter’s cheeks flushed as he continued. “When the lord saw God’s power, he started shaking and ordered the entrance to the room sealed. But that didn’t stop him from fearing for his life. Apparently, he died young.”

Beter wrapped up the story, saying that was the gist of it.

Ix and Shuno were silent for a moment. They glanced at each other and shrugged over who would be the first to speak.

“So, Beter...,” said Shuno, “what you just told us, isn’t that the legend of Rednoff?”

“Rednoff...?” asked Beter in confusion. “Uh, sorry, I can’t say for certain, but wasn’t he a famous wandmaker?”

“You could say that...”

Ix and Shuno looked at each other.

While Rednoff was a person whose name didn't need repeating to a wandmaker, it seemed he wasn't a household name to people outside the field. In Beter's defense, it wasn't like Ix knew any of the names of the Marayist saints.

Nevertheless...

There were too many commonalities between the legend of Rednoff and this tale. The mention of “the ultimate wand” and the fact that this wandmaker went missing at the end were a perfect match.

“But anyway, I never did find the underground room. A story's just a story, right?” said Beter as he brought a hand to his head and finished the conversation.

“Why is that story a secret?” asked Ix. “If a miracle did occur, you'd think trying to spread the word about it would be a good thing.”

“Well... It's because the Chapel is a symbol of the Estosha. It would get a bad reputation if people heard it was built on that sort of sacrifice. Which is why I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone about it.”

Just then, someone called Beter's name from down the hall. He responded, then bowed to Ix and Shuno.

“That's right, there's actually a different ending to the story I just told,” said Beter, glancing up and placing his hand on the door.

“What's that ending?” asked Shuno.

“In the alternate version, the craftsman isn't saved in the end. He dies in that underground room. But afterward, he comes back to life as a spirit in order to exact his revenge. The lord seals the chamber so his ghost can't get out.”

“Huh. Is that story a secret, too?”

“Not quite a secret... But it's probably just a tale that some monk made up a long time ago. It's mostly used to scare new monks. You know, like what happened in the cafeteria before.”

“Ah...”

It wasn't an urban legend so much as a story shared in this sole location. Even if it caused an uproar, it would be out of more amusement than fear. The monks were surprisingly mundane in some respects.

Beter said his good-byes and left the room.

Once Ix and Shuno finished cleaning, Coaku got up from where he'd been sitting in front of the fire. “That was an interesting story,” he said before leaving. The two of them were shocked; they'd completely forgotten the old man was there.

Ix hadn't seen Riess since the day of the ghost uproar in the cafeteria. Perhaps she had things to do in the city, or maybe she just found the monastery boring. Neither Coaku nor Shuno seemed to mind, and Ix decided it would be odd to go out of his way to ask about her, so he still didn't know why she wasn't here.

“Maybe we should go back to our rooms, too,” suggested Shuno with a huge yawn. “And we won't be able to talk tonight. The rooms are too small, and the monks will probably get angry at us if we do.”

“Yeah, seems that way,” said Ix.

“But we should be able to get plenty of shut-eye. There won't be any drunks around, unlike at the hotel... What'll we do if there's someone who snores really loudly, though?” said Shuno while flashing a grin.

Ix didn't say anything, only shrugged. He was already used to these kinds of crude conversations. Though he did agree that they would be able to sleep soundly in the monastery.

But that night, something happened.

It was deep in the middle of the night. Ix was asleep. Initially, he'd been very cold in the frigid air, despite cocooning himself in his blankets. Eventually, however, his body heat began to warm the bed, and he even got used to the sound of the blizzard. He slipped quickly into sleep when he closed his eyes.

Suddenly, Ix felt someone shake him. He half opened his eyes.

“I-I-Ix... W-wake up...,” came a voice.

Something hot tapped his nose, and he reflexively leaned back. He cast his eyes toward the entrance and saw that the door was open. *That's right*, he remembered. He wasn't in his usual hotel lodgings. The monastery bedrooms didn't have locks.

"All right, I'm awake; let go of me for a sec," mumbled Ix quickly. He brought a hand to his nose and found a drop of water on it.

"A-ah, sorry," Shuno said, immediately drawing back.

The two apprentices sat on the bed side by side, Ix with a blanket wrapped around his shoulders. They only had a single candle for light, but for as dark as it was, Ix's eyes had adjusted, so he could see well.

Shuno had calmed down and was no longer weeping.

"No, I wasn't crying," they denied, crossing their arms. "Come on, Ix—I know you've just woken up, but there's no way I'd be crying."

"What happened, then?"

"Oh man, so the thing is, it was..." Shuno cleared their throat in an overexaggerated fashion and continued. "I saw a gh-gh-ghost. I thought I should let you know."

"....."

"What? Why are you staring at me like that?"

"...You had a bad dream."

"It wasn't a nightmare! There really was someone there!"

"Then it was just a person, not a ghost."

"What? Uh, well... No, no. Come on! Just listen to me before you say anything."

Ix nodded reluctantly and Shuno began their story.

They'd woken up just a few minutes ago. They were thirsty, so they went down to the cafeteria to get a drink.

With nothing but a candlestick in hand to rely on in the pitch black, they made their way into the cafeteria. That was when they heard a sound in the kitchen. It

wasn't the sort of noise a mouse or the wind made—it was clearly the sound of footsteps.

Wondering if someone else was up, Shuno went into the kitchen to take a look and found...

"No one was there. There aren't many things you can hide behind in the kitchen, so I know they weren't out of sight. But I still heard the noise. It was even closer." Shuno wrapped their arms around their body. "So that means..."

"The kitchen? That's the same place as the commotion from before?"

"Yeah! Exactly! You remember, right?" Shuno pointed at Ix.

"But it was just a noise. It's not something to cry over."

"I tooold you, I wasn't crying. Are you actually listening to me?" Shuno got up a bit to readjust their seat on the bed. "So then, I tried calling out, 'Is anyone there?' And what do you think happened then?"

"No clue."

"It stopped! The sound went away! I didn't just mishear something; there really was *something* in the kitchen."

"Still..." Ix looked doubtful.

If what Shuno said was true, it wasn't a ghost they should suspect but a robber. Except he was hesitant to inform the abbot about it, considering it was only just some noise in the night. The fact that Shuno hadn't seen anyone just made the story all the weirder.

As Ix thought this over, they glanced at him and said, "Anyway. It doesn't matter if it's scary or not, you at least get how it's strange, yeah? That's why you should come with me back to the kitchen."

"...Why do you have to go back there?" asked Ix with a frown.

"To see what's going on!" said Shuno, spreading their arms and looking slightly irritated. "I was so shocked, I dropped my candle and left it behind when I came running back!"

There was no one else walking around the monastery at night. It was even quieter than at noon. This was in total contrast with the blizzard raging outside.

Ix held his candle out as he and Shuno walked down the hall. They couldn't even be certain where they were placing their feet in this kind of darkness.

They arrived at the cafeteria with no real issue, other than the danger of descending the stairs.

"I don't...hear anything," whispered Shuno from behind Ix. Ever since they'd entered the cafeteria, Shuno had been practically glued to Ix's back, so he was having difficulty walking.

"It doesn't matter if there's some noise, so long as it doesn't directly hurt us," said Ix with a snort.

"I-is that the problem?"

Ix entered the kitchen as Shuno directed. They really couldn't hear anything.

Ix bent over to bring his candle closer to the ground and quickly found the candleholder Shuno had dropped. The flame must have gone out when it fell to the floor. He saw where the candle itself had rolled a short distance from that.

"Here it is. Can you get off me now?" Ix said as he passed the candleholder over to Shuno.

"O-oh, th-thanks...", they said awkwardly.

Just as Ix bent down to pick up the candle, he stopped moving his hand.

"Hmm...?"

"Wh-what?! Don't scare me like that!" cried Shuno, their voice wavering.

"It's nothing...", said Ix as he illuminated the ground beneath the candle. "There's an underground room here. It's probably just a cellar for food storage, though."

A section of the floor was differently colored than the rest. There was a narrow crack around this section in the shape of a square. It had to be a door.

“Huh, you’re right,” said Shuno as they peered over. “...An underground chamber? Is it big enough for someone to crawl into...?”

“I doubt it’s very large. Maybe it’s just a little storage space or something,” mused Ix as he picked up the candle.

“R-right... Oh, light my candle, will you?”

Ix did as he was asked and lit Shuno’s candle. Though they now had the light of two candles, the room didn’t seem that much brighter. The kitchen was as dark as ever.

Since they’d gotten what they came for, Ix thought they should head back straightaway, but Shuno wasn’t budging for some reason. Instead, they were staring at the kitchen floor.

“What’s wrong? Can I go on back without you?” asked Ix.

“H-hey, Ix. Hold on a second. Can we look under here?” Shuno pointed at the floor Ix had seen earlier. “I mean, I know there’s probably nothing down there. But I just want to double-check to make sure there really isn’t anything...”

“All right. Let’s check really quick,” said Ix with a sigh.

The two of them lifted the conspicuous section of flooring. Though it had appeared to be a thick slab of stone, it was actually light enough that they could lift it instantly. They slid it to the side to reveal a square hole.

The two fell into silence as they stared inside.

“...I-it’s surprisingly deep,” noticed Shuno.

“Yeah.”

Pitch darkness blotted out the depths of the hole.

Attached to the edge of the entrance was a wooden ladder, and they could tell it descended deep into the chamber. That meant the room was large enough for a person to enter.

The two stared at each other for a few seconds.

“O-okay, how about this?” said Shuno, holding up a finger. “I go first and check it out. If there aren’t any issues, I’ll call you down.”

“You sure you’re okay with that?”

“O-of course. Who do you think I am? In times like this, the more experienced person should go first, right?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Huh?”

“What do we do if there is a problem down there?”

“Oh... R-right, uh...” Shuno grimaced slightly. “O-okay, if you don’t hear my voice...first put the cover back on, then go and get help. How ’bout that?”

“Right... Okay. Don’t slip.”

“S-stop. I mean, not that it’s actually bothering me! All right, here I go. It’s not like this is going to turn out to be a big deal or anything, ha-ha-ha...”

Shuno placed a foot on the ladder with an empty laugh. They descended dexterously, the candleholder still in hand. Ix watched them from above.

“Urgh, it’s so cold down here, Ix...,” came Shuno’s quiet voice.

“If it’s too much, just come back.”

“Huh, what did you say? Speak up.”

“.....”

“Oh, here’s the ground. Heeey, I made it to the bottom!”

Shuno’s voice echoed up from the hole, but Ix could see only a faint orange glow from the candle amid the darkness. He could make out neither Shuno’s face nor anything around them. It didn’t seem as deep as they’d thought, though. You could probably jump down the entrance and land without injuring yourself.

“Whoa, it’s bigger than I expected. But it does seem like it’s used for storage. I’m going to check it out a bit,” said Shuno.

The light disappeared from Ix’s view for a moment. Shuno must have moved farther into the room. They came back quickly and called up, “No problems!”

Ix descended the ladder just as Shuno had. In contrast to when he’d been

staring down at the cellar from above, the darkness of the hole made it seem like the ladder went on forever. Ix got the impression he was descending into the belly of a massive creature.

The underground chamber was larger than expected but still only about the size of one of the monastery bedrooms. All it contained were two rows of shelves packed full of preserved foods. Not even a ghost could hide in a room like this.

“I bet they store this food for when there are blizzards, like now,” mused Shuno. “Hmm, I’m surprised how clean it is. There’s not even any dust on the ground. It’s pretty interesting. With how cold it is... I wonder if it was built to be like this or if it’s just because it’s winter? Or maybe both?”

“Let’s get back soon. We look like thieves,” said Ix, standing right by the ladder.

“Hmm? Thieves?” Shuno turned back toward him to ask what he meant but stopped moving the moment they turned to him. “Ix, your...”

Shuno pointed at him. Ix followed his finger and also froze for a moment.

The flame of the candle he was holding was flickering slightly.

If they hadn’t come at night and if they hadn’t been together, they never would have noticed it.

If you came down here during the day, you wouldn’t have to go to the trouble of bringing a light with you. The sunlight from above would be enough to see. And if you went in at night, but alone, you wouldn’t thoroughly inspect the flame in your own hands.

But right now, the fire on Ix’s candle was flickering, even though he wasn’t moving a muscle. Where was the draft coming from?

Ix carefully searched the area with his candle and concluded that air was blowing in from below. He brought his face close to the ground and indeed felt a slightly chilly breeze brush his cheek.

The floor of this room was composed of wooden planks. Ix decided to test the strength of the boards by pulling on one where the breeze was strongest. It

came up easily.

“Uhhh... So what does this mean?” murmured Shuno.

“I think we’ve got a winner,” said Ix, though he was still half stunned at this turn of events.

Below the planks was a space large enough for a person to stand and walk around in.

Ix peeked in and could tell it extended quite a distance for the exact same length in all directions. There was no way it was a naturally occurring cave.

It was a deliberately constructed passage. A tunnel that connected the monastery to some other location.

Ix jumped down and felt an even stronger draft. It was quite a large space.

“H-hey, Ix?” Shuno placed their hands on the floor and looked down at him.

“What’s wrong?”

“‘*What’s wrong?*’ ...Don’t just plunge in without saying anything first! You scared me...,” muttered Shuno as they jumped down, too. “What now? Are we exploring?”

“Huh?”

“I mean, you’re gonna poke around a bit, aren’t you? We did find this place, after all. Wasn’t that why you came down?”

“No, I didn’t really have that in mind. Do you want to check it out, Shuno?”

“Uh, well, I, uh... Yeah, yeah I do.” Shuno puffed out their chest. “I always wanted to do this kind of thing. Adventuring and whatever. It’s exciting, isn’t it? I doubt the monks even know about this place.”

“I doubt it. We might get in trouble if they catch us. Maybe even get kicked out.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. We’ll just check it out a bit, then come back. It’s the middle of the night, so we’ve got nothing to worry about if we come back partway.”

“But...”

“What is it, Ix? Are you scared?”

“I’m not scared.”

“That means you agree with me, then! Let’s go! Ah, let’s close the hole in the ceiling there and just put a mark for us to remember. Blow out your candle, too. If my candle looks like it’s burning low, then I’ll light yours, and we’ll switch to that.”

Shuno ended with that, leaving no room for argument, and Ix just went along. Though to be honest, he was genuinely curious himself. That’s why he’d jumped down before Shuno.

As you might expect, what they’d heard from Beter was in the back of Ix’s mind, the tale of a room below the Chapel and the disappearance of Rednoff. Surely Shuno was thinking the same.

But there was one concern that Ix hadn’t communicated to the other apprentice: Why was this underground space clean?

Obviously, the hardworking monks must have tidied the cellar every day, but did they really venture down to this incredibly inconvenient place? It was odd that there was no dust anywhere.

It would be a different story, however, if someone had been coming and going through here recently. If someone lifted that floorboard, only a portion of the dust would fall into the hole. The rest would spread around the area. They must have cleaned it to avoid being discovered...

That’s what Ix imagined anyway, but he shook his head and decided he was overthinking things.

Shuno had walked on ahead but had stopped to wave at him.

“Heeey, Ix. What’s up? You can hide behind me if you’re scared. I am your senior, after all.”

Ix quickly caught up with them instead of answering. It wasn’t because he was afraid; if he got separated, he wouldn’t have any light.

1

The dark passage seemed to go on forever. It didn't shift up or down; it just continued on ahead. Though it was a relief to know they didn't have to worry about getting lost, there was nothing to suggest they should turn back, either. They just continued trudging through the darkness. Shuno walked in front with Ix trailing behind, same as when they'd set off.

Shuno had seemed nervous initially but must have gotten bored of the place after a while, because they'd started chatting with Ix.

"That's right, you worked at the front of a wand shop... Must have been tough," said Shuno with a serious nod after asking about Ix. "You could say you were born into being a wandmaker. Guess that's the opposite of me."

"So you only recently became Marlan's apprentice?" asked Ix in surprise.

"Well, I'm not sure '*recently*' is the right way of putting it...", said Shuno, leaving a lot unsaid in their embarrassment. "For a long time, everyone thought I'd take up the family business. I apprenticed under my dad. But our line of work wasn't doing so great. After waffling for a bit, I suddenly made up my mind and switched careers to wandmaking. That's why I notice my attitude is usually a bit different compared to the people around me. I've never had that devotion to wands so many start out with."

Ix could hardly believe his ears. How could someone with their history become such a gifted craftsman? Up until now, Ix had assumed Shuno had been studying for ages.

"So then...why'd you become a wandmaker?" asked Ix. "I'm sure there were plenty of other options."

"It didn't come down to anything serious. I guess I had a bit of a rivalry."

“Rivalry?”

“Man, this passage is so long. I know I’m the one who suggested we go, but I can’t believe nothing’s changed yet...” Shuno sighed. “Where the heck does this lead?”

“Estosha, probably. It’s heading in the right direction.”

“Uh... Ummm, the kitchen faced that way, and the building faces that way...” muttered Shuno as they crossed their arms, then brought a hand to their forehead. “If it goes directly to town, then yeah, it’s going to be pretty far.”

“We walk this distance back and forth all the time. And since it’s direct, it should be a bit shorter. If there’s an exit on the other end, that is.”

“Don’t say such horrible things.” Shuno slumped their shoulders. “You know, Ix, I bet you were thinking the same thing as I was, but I’m honestly doubtful now.”

“Why now?” asked Ix with a frown.

If a craftsman were shut up in an underground room, it would be quite plausible for him to escape via a secret passage.

“Just look at it. There’s no way a single person could dig a tunnel as long as this on their own. And it would take time. You’d need a significant amount of authority and money to build this. And the fact that one entrance is from the monastery means someone with influence in the Church probably commissioned it. You wouldn’t do all this to save one measly craftsman. I’m more inclined to believe it’s a passage for the lord to escape. This city is on the edge of the kingdom’s border. It could become the target of a siege at any time,” explained Shuno like it was nothing. “And most importantly, this passage is so boring! It just screams ‘for military use.’”

“Which would mean the other end spits out at the lord’s manor or thereabouts?”

“Exactly. There’s no sign it’s been used until now, either...” said Shuno, sounding bored. “But there is one thing I don’t understand: How did they dig this passage?”

“...There is that.” Ix nodded.

Ix hadn't noticed it until Shuno pointed it out, but they were right. He really didn't know how someone would go about making such a long and straight passage. It would take incredible amounts of labor if done by hand, but you would imagine it would result in some slight curves at least. The workers would run into rocks and other obstacles.

While digging a perfectly straight tunnel wasn't physically infeasible, it made you wonder why they went to the effort of finishing the passage.

“What about with magic? Would that be possible?” asked Shuno with a raised finger.

“Depends on the period,” replied Ix. “If it was with wands made in the past couple of decades, then yes, it's conceivable. Any further back than that, though, and the efficiency wouldn't be good enough.”

“Right...”

There was almost nothing in the passageway, save for some rags and broken wooden boxes.

But after continuing on for a while, they came across a row of medium-sized wooden casks lining the walls of the tunnel.

Curious as to what was inside them, the pair got closer to take a look and found that one of the lids was broken. The crate had been filled to the brim, and a small portion of its contents had spilled out.

Ix scooped up what had fallen to the floor and cocked his head.

“Is this sand?” he asked.

He couldn't make out what color it was due to the darkness, but it felt exactly like sand. It was damp and contained a few hardened lumps but still had a distinct gritty texture.

Why was this here? And how much was there? It was a complete mystery.

But as Ix stood there confused, Shuno brought some of the substance to their nose to sniff it, then suddenly backed away from the casks, the flame of the candle in their hand wavering.

“Ooooh...that scared me,” said Shuno, their back pressed hard against the opposite wall and holding a hand over their heart.

“Does it smell that bad?” asked Ix in confusion. “Or is it dangerous?”

“Uh, w-well, I guess so. Though, not really. It just surprised me. Let’s go, Ix.”

“Huh?”

By the time he turned to look, Shuno had already left him behind and was walking ahead. The flame of the candle was fading into the distance.

“What’s going on?” asked Ix as he rushed to catch up. “Aren’t you curious, Shuno? Who would put that stuff down here?”

“Figures you would keep thinking about it...,” said Shuno, their voice trailing off. “This place is protected from the wind and rain down here, so I bet some people stumbled on the passage and just started living here. Though it’s pretty dark for that.”

There were no sources of light in the tunnel. They could only rely on the glow of their candle. But they also didn’t know when a breeze might blow through and snuff out the flame. If it came down to it, Shuno could light a spark with basic magic, but their training as a wandmaker wouldn’t change the fact that they were a beginner at magic. The duo couldn’t get too comfortable.

“The heart of defense is below...?” remarked Ix, suddenly remembering something.

“Huh, what are you on about?” asked Shuno, glancing at Ix.

“It’s something Riess said before, that the heart of Estosha’s defense is below. I don’t know if that referred to the room under the Chapel or this passage, but I bet whoever coined that phrase does.”

“Huh... By the way, who’s Riess?”

“What?”

Shuno should have met her at the monastery, but maybe they hadn’t asked the girl her name.

“But anyway, defense...” Shuno continued, clearly more interested in the

previous topic of conversation than Riess. “If, say, invaders took over the city, the people of Estosha could do more than flee with this tunnel. They could also launch a counterattack from here. It’d throw the enemy off if Estosha soldiers showed up out of nowhere in the city.”

“Are you saying that this tunnel could allow Estosha to rebound from being sacked?”

“Well, I’m not sure... But this is an absurd line of defense. There’s no way the labor that went into this thing is justified.”

Ix agreed with that. He didn’t think the passage would be all that useful in war. Shuno had probably been right when he’d speculated about it being a way for the lord to escape. Or that it was constructed for some other purpose...

After going ahead for a while, Shuno cried out.

“Oh, that section’s different from all the others!”

They examined the wall and found that one section was a different color from the rest. At first, Ix thought it was just a trick of the light, but upon closer inspection, he realized it really was distinct. In fact, this was...

“A door, it’s definitely a door,” muttered Shuno as they brought the flame closer.

Before them stood a small door designed to blend into the wall.

There were narrow slats cut into it at eye height and near their feet. Unfortunately, however, it was pitch-black inside, so they couldn’t see anything.

The entrance didn’t have a doorknob, but it would defeat the purpose if it had been designed to be pulled. Shuno placed a hand on the section of wall, and it swung inward with surprising ease.

“Oh, it’s open,” they said, stepping inside.

Ix had assumed there would be a tiny chamber on the other side, but it was actually quite large. The candlelight alone wasn’t enough to reveal the entire space.

“This is amazing. What is it?” echoed Shuno’s voice from farther in the room. The walls and floor had been carved out of stone. “Get in here, Ix.”

Ix stepped in, and the door swung shut by itself. It must have been set on an angle.

A quick investigation revealed that the chamber was circular in shape. It wasn't exactly huge, but it was equivalent in size to a room in a fancy manor. However, there wasn't much in the way of furniture, just a small bed and table, along with some small wooden boxes attached to the walls.

Actually...that wasn't all.

In the middle of the room—in the dead center of the circle—was a pillar. The thing was crooked despite being made of stone, and it had a strange, slouching form. Considering the size of the room, it had to be holding up the roof. Or so Ix and Shuno thought at first.

But once they approached it, they saw that some of the stones of the pillar had been chipped away to reveal the interior.

They brought the light closer and stared inside.

In the center of the pillar was a very neatly worked, long, thin log.

"Is that...," started Shuno, like they couldn't help themselves, before trailing off.



“We can’t tell yet. Not unless we take detailed measurements,” said Ix, forcing himself to remain calm.

“Y-yeah, of course...” Shuno nodded a few times. “Right, so what do we do? Go back to the monastery and...grab our tools?”

“Yeah, let’s do that,” said Ix.

“But c’mon, that’s the only thing it could be.”

Ix and Shuno continued this vague back-and-forth for a while. Both of them were struggling to take it all in. They had entered the passage with a glimmer of hope, of course, but they weren’t prepared for a discovery of this magnitude. They thought they were just going for a little stroll.

Ultimately, they concluded they should head back to the monastery for the time being, so they rushed toward the door.

But Ix came to a halt in front of it.

“What’s wrong? Do you want to check it out a bit more before we go?” asked Shuno from behind him.

“No...” His eyes drifted skyward as he spoke. “You’re the one who opened the door, right, Shuno?”

“Yeah, it was me.”

“Did you push it open?”

“Yeah, you have to push it, since there’s not a doorknob...,” said Shuno, trailing off.

There was a silence as Shuno waited for Ix to contradict what they said.

“W-w-wait, Ix, you can’t be telling me...”

Ix let out a slight sigh and flatly said, “Yeah. There’s no doorknob on this side, either.”

Every attempt to open the door failed.

That being said, there weren't all that many methods to try out in the first place. The entrance was completely flush with the wall. There was nowhere to grab onto it with your fingers. Even when they tried slipping their hands through the holes in the door, their knuckles wouldn't fit. They could get their fingertips to wrap around to the other side, but that didn't let them apply enough force to open the door.

Ix wondered if Shuno could do something with magic, but when he asked them, all they said was, "With how heavy it is... Uh, I-I'm not sure..." so Ix dropped it there. If Shuno ran out of mana, then they wouldn't even be able to light the candle.

They struggled with the door for about an hour, but it gave no indication of budging. They could find no avenue of escape, almost as though the room had been designed to trap them.

At first, Ix had managed to keep cool, but as it dawned on him that there was no way out, a disgusting sweat began to run down his forehead. While he did manage to keep his panic from showing, that was primarily because Shuno was doing enough for the both of them.

"C-c-calm down, Ix. It's all over if we lose control. We have to, have to keep calm. We got in here, so there's got to be some way out. And besides, I bet someone will pass through the corridor while we're in here," said Shuno while nodding furiously.

"Down this tunnel?"

"Sh-shut up. Do you want to help or not?"

"Of course I want to help."

"Then stop being so pessimistic. Just wait—I'll come up with a way to get us out of here..."

Ix looked around. It was even more silent down here than it was aboveground. He realized he was still wearing the outfit he'd gone to sleep in. He didn't even have a coat on.

And even though he'd just shot down Shuno's hope of someone coming to their rescue, they really had no other options but to wait for that to happen, since there was no way for them to open the door themselves. The monks would notice their disappearance from the monastery come morning. They'd left the cover to the storage room open, so there was a chance someone would discover the passage.

Either that, or there was that other possibility that had struck Ix when he and Shuno first entered—that someone had used the passage recently. It was their only other hope, but there was no guarantee that person would be willing to lend a hand.

Regardless, they needed to accept they would be there for quite a while. With that in mind...

Ix looked at Shuno, who had their back to him and their head in their hands, and said, "Why don't you sleep for now?"

"Wh-what?" They turned toward Ix. "What are you even saying? How could I ever relax enough to sleep in a situation like this?!"

"The thing we most want to avoid right now is wearing ourselves out," stated Ix, lowering his voice. "As we noticed earlier, there are strange objects in the passage and signs of someone having used it. Obviously, formulating a way to open the door would be best, but right now, all we can do is wait for someone. Our best option is to take turns sleeping while we pass the time."

"I guess so... But if that's the case, you should rest first."

"No, you first." Ix shook his head. "You're the only one who can use magic. I don't know what we can use it for, but we need to have you at full strength just in case."

"Uh... Okay. Not that I'll be able to sleep in a situation like this..."

Shuno wobbled unsteadily over to the bed in the chamber and lay down.

Ix sat on the floor, leaned against the door, and pulled his knees up to his chest.

He blew out the flame on the now-quite-small candlestick, and the room

plunged into darkness.

No matter if he opened his eyes or closed them, all he could see was a world of black.

It struck him that the world above was white, and the world below was black.

“Hey, Ix,” came Shuno’s voice from the darkness. “I actually...was planning on opening a shop in this town. My master introduced me to an old shop. So once this job is over and my craftsman qualification is figured out, you should come, too.”

“Yeah, I’ll come visit if I get the chance.”

“That’s not what I mean. I’m inviting you to work with me. You shouldn’t let talent like yours go to waste working as an apprentice.”

“Together?” Ix raised his head and blinked. “...But just being employed at your shop wouldn’t guarantee I could become a craftsman.”

“That’s true, but...” Shuno muttered to themselves for a moment, then let out a cry of consternation. “Fine. I’ll just be straight with you. I want to collaborate with you. Don’t you feel the same?”

“.....”

“...Right. Well, just give it some thought, will you?”

Ix heard Shuno roll over, and he quietly replied, “Okay.”

Perhaps as a consequence of being wound up for so long, the sound of snoring soon came from the bed. Now that he thought about it, Ix realized they’d left the monastery in the dead of night. Sleepiness hit him all at once, as though he’d only just remembered to feel it.

What time was it anyway?

He felt like they’d spent an incredibly long time here, but assuming they were below Estosha, their walk here couldn’t have taken very long. Adding that to the time they spent panicking would mean it was still the middle of the night.

Ix let out a heavy sigh.

The two of them had decided together to go into the cellar and explore the

passage. But it was clearly his own fault they'd gotten trapped here.

He should have remained outside when Shuno went in. Or he really should have figured out how the door worked the moment he noticed there wasn't a knob. But instead, he'd entered it thoughtlessly...

Moron was hardly a strong enough word to describe him.

And while it would be perfectly natural to shout insults at Ix for what he'd done, Shuno never did any of that. In fact, Shuno went so far as to say they would find a way out. Somehow, they seemed to think this whole thing was their fault.

Ix thought about what would happen if they couldn't get out. It didn't matter what happened to him, but Shuno was absolutely going to be a craftsperson someday. How could he ever apologize to them?

"What are you doing?"

Ix suddenly thought he could hear someone's voice.

He jumped in surprise and swung around to face the door.

"Just now...", he said hoarsely.

"Ix?" answered a young girl's voice.

"I know that voice... Riess?"

"Correct," replied her cheerful voice, unsuited to the situation. Ix could see the flickering light of her lamp through the hole in the door. "I can't believe we'd meet in a place like this. I'm a little disappointed, since it doesn't seem like you were coming to see me. But still, I'm happy. I haven't seen you in so long."

Ix didn't say anything for a while, only wondering what the heck she was talking about.

"...Do you know the story about the ghost?" he finally asked after a moment's confusion. For some reason, he suddenly suspected that Riess herself was the specter.

He was obviously aware that this was a ridiculous idea to entertain, but upon further consideration, he couldn't help feeling like it all made sense. The

commotion about the ghost in the monastery had happened the day Riess visited. Hadn't she eaten lunch that day?

And there were a few other strange things. She'd known who Ix was from the moment he set foot in town. She seemed oddly friendly toward him and showed off a breadth of knowledge you wouldn't expect from a child. It was also weird how she would appear out of nowhere only to disappear the same way. Now she'd even manifested in this secret underground passage. And Shuno didn't seem to know anything about her.

"Of course I do," answered Riess.

"...Riess, what are you doing here at a time like this?"

"Taking a walk."

"Huh?"

"It's cold and dangerous outside. Down here, there's no snow on the ground, and no one will find me and scold me," she said with a bitter chuckle. "Ah, but you found me. Can you keep it a secret? In return, I'll tell you about the ghost."

Ix was taken aback, unable to press her on the topic more.

"...Okay," he said.

"It's a famous story in this city. It's a tale that everyone's heard at least once but no one tells."

"No one tells?"

"Yes," murmured Riess. Then, as if reading aloud from a book, she said, "Long, long ago, there was a couple who desperately wanted a child but were never blessed with one, no matter what they did. With no other options, they named a doll carved from wood and doted on it like it was their own. But then one day, they encountered a dragon. The dragon was curious about the couple who treated this doll like their offspring. And the couple asked a favor of the dragon. 'For a child, you ask? No, not that.' They asked the dragon to give life to the doll. As requested, the dragon brought it to life. It moved. But the couple had made a mistake."

Ix listened silently to Riess's fluid storytelling.

“It was only a single mistake. They’d asked for life; they hadn’t asked for a soul. Without a soul, the doll had nowhere to go once its body rotted away. Now, it wanders the town, as it will for all eternity. That’s why people hear things sometimes—it’s the ghost crying out in lament...” Riess’s voice dropped there. “But this story is also a secret that doesn’t leave this place. You can’t accidentally tell it to the people at the monastery who belong to the Church. Because only God can grant life.”

Once she finished speaking, the howling of the wind down the passage seemed to grow louder.

Ix couldn’t help thinking about how strange the tale was, because he had a connection to dragons. He hadn’t even been chasing after them, yet he still found himself running into their footprints, even here...

Before he could say anything, Riess’s voice came from the other side of the door again.

“But how’d you find this place? The entrance on the monastery side is pretty well hidden.”

“Is this place...the heart of defense that you mentioned before?” asked Ix, getting swept up by what she’d said. “It looks like you could use it to escape the city if it came down to it...”

“The important thing is that it makes you think there’s something here,” said Riess, as though she was lecturing a small child. “Secrets always get out. To prevent that, you have to poison the secret. It doesn’t matter if this passageway gives you the impression they made an escape route or makes you speculate they built a defense system; both draw you in. That’s why they put in a trap here.”

“A trap? I didn’t see anything like that.”

“Of course you’d think that. You wouldn’t know much about that.”

“How do you know about this place, Riess? You’re talking like you’re well-informed.”

“Because I’ve gone to the monastery so many times as an assistant,” she answered bluntly. “There’s nothing there, so it’s boring. Sometimes, I play hide-

and-see by myself there. Though I didn't get in here from the monastery today."

"There's another entrance, right? Where is it?"

"You're always so full of questions," said Riess with a giggle.

"...Why haven't you been to the monastery in a while?"

"Don't ask rude questions." Now she sounded like she was pouting. "Even kids have things to do. I can't go there every day. How's it going over there anyway?"

"Do you mean with me? Or Coaku?"

"Coaku, of course. I am his assistant."

"It's mean to say this, but I honestly have no idea why he even bothers coming," said Ix frankly. "He just sits in front of the fireplace sleeping the whole time. He's never given us advice or corrected us. Did the monastery know he's like this and invite him anyway?"

"Really? That's weird."

"What is?"

"Well, I listen to Coaku every day, and he always tells me about how you and Shuno work. He says you'll both make really good craftspeople."

"...He's just saying what he's expected to."

"I don't think so."

"Anyway, Riess, stop chatting," said Ix, having remembered the situation he was in after a moment of silence. "Right now, we're—"

"I know, you don't have to say it. You're shut in there, right?" said Riess, taking the words right out of his mouth.

"Y-yeah. Can you open the door from that side?"

"Sorry, I'm not strong enough. I'll go get help, though. Can you sit tight until then?"

"We can probably manage that long."

“Okay. See you in a bit, then.”

The light flickered on the other side of the door, and he heard the sound of soft footsteps. But after a few beats, they suddenly ceased.

“By the way, do you have an answer to my invitation? Did you think about it?” asked Riess.

“Huh?” Ix could only blurt out a confused noise in response to the abrupt question.

“Ah, you forgot... Don’t say anything. I’ll be waiting at the Chapel on the night of Heaven’s Worship.”

“No, it’s just this isn’t—”

The footsteps moved away before Ix could finish his statement. Upon further reflection, he realized he hadn’t heard her coming in the first place.

That aside, it seemed like he and Shuno would make it out after all. That thought caused the tension to suddenly drain from Ix’s body. He sat on the ground, laid his face between his knees, and let out a heavy sigh.

After that, he drifted off. Then he heard the clear sound of footsteps and snapped back to consciousness. Two or three people were approaching.

The moment Ix got up to look at the door, a blinding light shone into his face.

“Ah, it’s true... Are you all right? I’m opening the door now,” said a man with a concerned expression. His long hair was tied back behind him. He had two people with him, one on either side. They looked like attendants of some sort. They were carrying lamps. “There should be another person with you, yes? A woman?”

“Yeah, they’re sleeping in the back,” said Ix with a nod. “Did Riess tell you?”

“Hmm? What was that?” asked the man with a tilt of his head. “No, one of my attendants heard voices coming from the tunnel. I couldn’t believe it, but I came to check just in case...”

That was how Ix and Shuno were rescued, but the man didn’t chastise them at all. He was actually surprised by the two of them. And once he learned they were both wandmaking apprentices, he smiled.

“No, I don’t think there really is a need to keep this a secret. It is actually quite well known by anyone related to the Church with a significant enough position of authority,” said the man. They walked down the passage in the same direction Shuno and Ix had originally been traveling, away from the monastery. “Though I’m not so sure the monastery is too happy with the situation, which is why you really should be reprimanded, but... It does make me happy, though, to have such enthusiastic young folks find this place, even if it was by chance. I do think it’s something young wandmakers such as yourselves should see.”

“By ‘it...’” said Shuno, whose face had been one of sleepy contentment until recently, “do you mean the room beneath the Chapel?”

“Oh, you know about that as well? It seems you are doing quite the excellent job at the monastery,” said the man as he looked back at them. “You’re exactly right. That is none other than the ultimate wand left behind by Rednoff. The Chapel is actually there because the wand supports it.”

“Really? How do you prove something like that?”

“I-Ix!” cried Shuno as they covered his mouth. “That’s not something you say to the person who saved us!”

“No, it’s a perfectly reasonable question,” said the man with a strong nod. His long bundle of his hair bobbed up and down. “Even the people who knew of the underground chamber lacked any certainty over whether the story of Rednoff they’d known for so long was fact or fiction. They even questioned if it really was a wand. But once, a renowned wandmaker came to town. They showed him to the special underground room and asked him to inspect the wand, on the condition that it be kept secret. And so he did. Apparently, he took a look at it and said, ‘This is the ultimate wand.’”

“Huh. Who was the craftsman?” asked Shuno.

“I’m sure you’ll have heard the name. It was Munzil Alreff.”

“Huh...?” Ix couldn’t help gaping.

His master had really said that...?

“Th-that’s a seriously big name...,” said Shuno, shrinking their shoulders as they were overcome by shock for different reasons than Ix.

As they walked forward, the man cheerfully added, “And then just the other day, I discovered there are craftsmen who apprenticed under Master Alreff in town. I showed the two of them that room as well, and they said it was, without a doubt, the ultimate wand.”

“Wait, there were two of them?” said Ix suddenly in a loud voice. “What are their names?”

“What? Oh, you probably haven’t heard of them. They’re called Rolphie and Hemsley.”

“Them too...?” Ix cast his eyes down and brought a hand to his mouth. Those were the names of Munzil’s third and fourth apprentices.

Ix was more shocked by what they had said than the fact they were in Estosha. Even more so that it was those two, of all people. Out of all Munzil’s apprentices, they were the least invested in wands. Would they really say something like that? Something that you’d normally expect from a stereotypical wandmaker?

Ix took a whiff of fresh air. He looked up to find stairs a little ways ahead. One of the attendants went up ahead to open the door, letting in blinding light that stung his eyes.

They’d made it outside.

At some point, morning had come. Gold light spilled over the tops of the buildings. The wind had calmed, and Ix could see wisps of clouds in the sky. It was cold out, and a breeze more frigid than the one underground swept by.

This exit wasn’t located on the grounds of a building; instead, it led directly into the street. Normal houses lined either side of the road.

“Good work, you’ve made it to the exit,” said the man, turning back from where he’d stepped out. His form was obscured by shadow, backlit as it was. “I would ask that you keep this entrance a secret. The Church pretends it is just storage. You must be tired. If you’d like, please join me at the building I live in. I would very much like to speak with the both of you.”

Ix was so lost in thought that the invitation didn’t even reach him.

But that was to be expected.

After all, to his eyes, the “ultimate wand” in that underground room appeared to be nothing more than an ordinary log.

3

The blizzard calmed, and the quiet light of winter spilled into the room. Nova hadn't arrived yet.

Since morning, Yuui had passed the time reading. Specifically, the book that Gustavus had told her about, the one with the ghost stories. Though he'd called it a book, it wasn't actually bound, so it was really more like a diary or set of notes.

“It's something the priest at the time wrote down,” said Seyoh the night before when she'd visited his room. He happily lent it to her. The bundle had been stored on top of a shelf, so it took some time for him to find it.

“It looks quite old...,” remarked Yuui as she stroked the cover sheet.

“It was written just after the Chapel was completed.” Seyoh clasped his hands together and nodded. “Though you should know it's not particularly interesting. I haven't read the whole thing.”

“Why do you have it?”

“Hmm... I'm not sure there is any particular reason,” he said with an uncertain smile. “It's not useful, but I'm hesitant to throw it away. It's essentially the result of two acquaintances trying to push it on each other.”

Yuui had fallen asleep that night but quickly picked the book up the following day, as she had nothing to do.

She took a look into the book and found that the priest had written an introduction: *Recently, I have heard several odd tales. They all resemble one another, so I have decided to record them here.*

That's what it said. In light of his position, the priest must have frequently given the townspeople advice.

Once Yuui got into the book proper, she found a stream of short, concise paragraphs, perhaps a reflection of the author's personality. They were almost all written like an itemized report, listing the person's name, occupation, and what they were seeking advice about.

Just as Gustavus and Seyoh had told her, it wasn't an entertaining read. The entries were barely distinct.

For example:

Rodak, tailor, female, early morning. Went out to get water from the well where she heard people talking. They were all male voices. Was unable to see the speakers. The voices moved away.

Ulaft, glove maker, male, night. Heard footsteps during a drinking party with friends. Stepped outside but saw no one. The footsteps continued for some time.

Filrin, blast wandmaker, male. Heard the voice of someone he knows who had moved to a nearby town. Evening.

Azzie, carpenter's wife, female. Heard something that sounded like crowds of people passing by the house in the middle of the night. Went outside with husband to look but found no footprints.

All the statements were short like the above. They were very similar, essentially just people hearing voices or footsteps during the night until dawn. The accounts went on and on, spanning dozens of people.

It was obvious that Seyoh was right, and this was written by someone from a long time ago. The age of the actual pages made it feel historical, but so did the vocabulary and grammar usage. It was fairly difficult to read and, had she been in any other situation, she would have tossed it aside herself as well.

However, as she absentmindedly turned the pages, she eventually found herself entirely absorbed.

This wasn't her first time looking through records of normal people. There was one time before when she'd read such daily accounts, so it reminded her of the excitement she'd felt then.

The people who produced this sort of writing were almost always in the

Church or held a position of authority, and their work usually focused on their peers. Obviously, this book was also written by a priest, but the content was different. It focused entirely on the people who lived in Estosha. While there was very little information in each small account, that only made her imagination run wild, which she enjoyed.

It was only because she'd been reading so intently that she realized something.

Here and there in the book were oddly thick pages.

Thinking this strange, Yuui closely examined the pages from the side and saw two pages stuck together. She had no idea how long they'd been like that, but a gentle tug told her they weren't about to come apart easily.

With no other option, Yuui took out her wand and cast the smallest spell she could. This sort of incantation required significantly more delicate control than casting something powerful. At the same time, there was rarely a use for a spell so fine, so the Academy didn't even bother to teach this kind of magic control. Yuui had read about it in a book and used it several times to test the limits of her wand.

The first cast was too weak. The second one, though, proved fruitful after some adjustment. The corners of the pages separated slightly. She grabbed onto that part and carefully pulled apart the pages.

They must have stuck together because of the ink that was used at the time. It wasn't suited to the paper and would cause the pages to affix to each other if they were pressed together for a while. It happened sometimes with older books. The characters on one of the pages she'd pulled apart had transferred to the other, leaving it incredibly difficult to read despite the simple, itemized writing style.

Now having gotten into the swing of things, Yuui was able to immediately pull apart the next set of stuck pages she came across. The content was exactly the same as the rest of the book. She smiled ironically as she thought that only someone as bored as her would go through all the trouble to pull these pages apart and read them.

But something was different about the last page in the book.

That page was also stuck, so just as she'd done before, she pulled it apart with magic. To her surprise, however, she found a long paragraph instead of a list of itemized accounts.

The characters on this page had also bled over, making it more difficult to read than any of the previous ones. Yuui gave up trying to interpret the words and instead copied them one by one onto another sheet of paper.

She frowned as she looked at the passage she'd created. It seemed to be a postscript from the priest.

This is only a small portion of the stories that have been brought to me by those seeking advice.

The first thing I can say is that it is evident ghosts do not exist. The scriptures speak of no such thing. After death, the soul ascends to heaven and is handed a fate of either eternal life or eternal death. There are no exceptions. It is not possible for a soul to remain in our world.



Despite knowing this, I did not refute the existence of ghosts. The reason I did not was because there are some things more sacred than the honesty of a priest, and I had to protect their honor.

It is no surprise that the blast wandmakers were angry. The tunnel extension would not have been possible had it not been for their utmost efforts. Without their help, we could not have completed excavation in such a short span of time. We were able to fulfill His Lordship's excessive request.

However, what awaited them once their work was complete could only be called betrayal.

In the underground space that they'd so labored over, a magic wand was placed.

I am pleased that His Lordship is so passionate about defense, but I never expected he would go so far as to invite Rednoff. Even I have heard tales of that man.

In reality, I am still skeptical of that wand's power. Everyone who has used it sings its praises, yet I still feel that the power and utility of blast wands surpass it.

But there is no doubt that both blast wands and magic wands are wisdom bestowed upon us by the Lord. It is not my place to personally choose which to stand behind. Nevertheless...

It seems that Rednoff, too, has lost himself slightly—no, significantly—in his old age. One might almost be inclined to believe he *wanted* to be imprisoned in that underground room. I personally heard him say, "Thank heavens no one can disturb me here."

According to the people who watch over him, he spends the majority of his days crafting wands. And when he is not crafting wands, he is jabbering nonsense. He speaks not to himself but to someone the observers cannot see. Almost as if he were conversing with a ghost...

I met Rednoff last night as well.

He grinned at me and said, “I can make the ultimate wand.”

I cannot determine whether or not he is still sane. But that is nothing more than a triviality in the face of the blast wandmakers’ wrath. If we are to take the ghost stories at face value, then they have clearly placed a trap within the passage.

I hope my suspicions on what they are plotting are nothing more than a misperception on my part, but we must verify it before we are thrown into a situation that cannot be undone.

Before it is all blown away.

A knock at the door brought Yuui back to herself. The light shining through the window had shifted far away. Noon had passed before she realized it.

She set the book on the table and called “enter” toward the door. Nova entered. She didn’t often show up around this time of day.

“They have decided, to hold dinner. It was, Seyoh’s suggestion,” she said. She’d come to inform Yuui.

“Dinner? Not the meeting?”

“No. The meeting participants, were all invited. That includes you, of course.”

“I thought these were supposed to be secret gatherings? That’s why we hold them in the middle of the night...”

“It is a dinner, and nonparticipants were also invited. Not people entirely, unrelated, though. Those two wandmakers, and some others, apparently.”

“Some others?”

“Yes. Some others,” said Nova curtly. “Anyway, not many people move around, during winter. Holding the meetings during night or day, has negligible effects on their secrecy. And the need to use lamps at night, renders the difference pointless.”

“Perhaps... When will it be?”

“Tonight.”

“And when was it scheduled?”

“Five days ago.”

“I see...” Yuui let out a little sigh, but she’d become used to this sort of sudden development. “All right. I will attend.”

“Okay.” Nova nodded. “I also, have information on the investigation.”

“Huh? What investigation?”

“Into the threat letter from the other day, as well as the attack on you,” said Nova emotionlessly. “First, I don’t believe, it had anything to do with Old Order forces.”

“How can you be certain?”

“I investigated.”

“How?”

“I spoke to members, of the Old Order.”

Yuui waited for further explanation, but Nova didn’t give any. She seemed to think this was a sufficient explanation. Yuui decided to just interpret that as Nova doing Yuui a favor in her absence.

“Ummm...” Yuui collected herself and asked, “You said ‘*first.*’ What else do you have to report?”

“Yes. There are some among the participants, who are voicing suspicions that it is an act, that it’s far too convenient.”

“An act... By whom?”

“Seyoh.”

“What?” Yuui was disappointed.

“He told the others about the threat letter. They seem to believe, it doesn’t actually exist, that it would make sense if it was a hoax he concocted.”

“That’s baseless conjecture. What could he possibly gain from doing that?”

“Yuui, didn’t you suspect someone, on the inside?”

“Uh, well... Yes, I did. I just think Seyoh doesn’t have much of a motive. Would he really try to destroy the meetings he’s worked so hard on?”

“They’re saying it’s actually the opposite, to move the meetings along,” countered Nova quietly, wary of who might be outside the door. “Make the participants feel threatened, to light a fire under the debates. They are saying, his enthusiasm went too far.”

“Huh... Then they’ll probably question him at the dinner.”

“It seems to me like Seyoh himself, is aiming for that,” said Nova with a tilt of her head. “He is creating a situation where he can defend himself, since the meetings won’t happen so long as there are suspicions.”

Yuui nodded as she listened, though she still felt some of what Nova had described didn’t add up.

“But if the threat letter was a result of Seyoh’s overzealousness, then that doesn’t explain the attack on me. Or do they suspect I am collaborating with him?” she asked.

“They say, Seyoh launched a pretend attack. He is near that location, and there isn’t anyone else who could accurately target you.”

“What was his goal, then?”

“You’ve drawn the attention of everyone. They would all band together if you were in danger.”

“That seems like a stretch.”

She didn’t know who’d claimed that, but she doubted even they believed the ideas they were putting forward. These monotonous winter days were amplifying their worthless imaginings.

With a condescending smile, she asked, “And who exactly was it who said these things?”

“Rolphie.”

“Huh?”

“Or perhaps it was Hemsley. But he doesn’t seem like the kind of person, to offer information.”

“Uh, no, that wasn’t what I was concerned with...”

Yuui had just been taken by surprise at hearing the unexpected name.

She started to wonder why someone who hadn't even attended the meetings yet was saying that but quickly stopped herself. She knew from experience there was no point in speculating about the behavior of Munzil's apprentices.

4

Yuui and Nova left the building temporarily before the dinner that evening. They made it look like they were coming from a different location, the same as they did for all the meetings. Though Yuui didn't understand why the charade was necessary at this point.

This time was different because they went to Mellay's manor first. Yuui had invited Mellay to walk with her and Nova to the dinner. Nova had insisted this would be safer. She had claimed that, while the situation would be the same as it was when they were last attacked, it would be easier to predict the enemy's actions.

"Though if I didn't go outside, I wouldn't require protecting," said Yuui as she looked back. "No one will be suspicious if I just happened to be the first to arrive once in a while."

"You, think?" Nova looked at Yuui.

"Responding with a question...? Yes, I do think."

"People have, different ways of thinking." Nova nodded, expressionless. "You will feel better, if you go outside sometimes."

"What?"

Yuui twisted her head back, feeling like that last statement had come out of nowhere. Yes, it may be healthier for her to go out than to stay shut in her room all the time, but it wasn't something that she could do given her position.

Yuui decided it must have been one of Nova's rare jokes. There was no way the charade they'd been playing out this whole time had been for Yuui's mental health.

They arrived at Mellay's manor, and the old woman immediately stepped out. Her usual attendant was behind her.

"Thank you for coming, Minaha," said Mellay as she walked down the steps of the entryway, holding out a hand in Yuui's direction.

"I see Rolphie and Hemsley are not present today," replied Yuui as she took her hand.

"They were only my guests that one time. I'm sure they've already headed off to the meeting place."

The two of them walked slowly through the snow-covered streets, not bringing up the two wandmakers' suspicions about Seyoh. They were four people in total, including the two attendants walking behind them.

There were other people out and about, perhaps because the blizzard had ended and turned into mild weather. The citizens didn't seem to have any particular destination in mind; instead, they appeared to just be getting some fresh air. Each of them was enjoying the momentary peace and quiet in their own way. The afternoon sun was warm, and the snow on the roads looked to be melting.

"It seems you speak with Seyoh often," said Mellay, as if the thought just suddenly occurred to her. "I also wish I had the opportunity to do that."

"He is looking after me in a way. We naturally have many opportunities to talk," replied Yuui. "And our discussions are rarely of any interest. Primarily just administrative types of topics."

"Oh... That's not quite what I've heard."

"And what is it that you've heard?" asked Yuui with a slight smile, interested.

"For example, that you once said faith is not academic."

Yuui was taken aback to hear the words she'd said but since forgotten brought up again. "That is... Yes, I did indeed say that..."

"No need to be so anxious. I've suspected that you weren't born into Marayism. That's the value you bring, the combination of lack of knowledge of the faith along with objectivity." Mellay smiled. "And I also have no intentions

of finding fault in what you've said. I just feel as if you are misunderstanding something, Minaha. It appears as if you have things backward."

"In other words, you mean to say faith is academic?"

"That would not be flipping the order. What I want to say is that academic studies are a religious pursuit."

Yuui couldn't help frowning, though Mellay couldn't see her face beneath her hood. The old woman continued speaking, her words unbroken, since she hadn't noticed Yuui's reaction.

"I am nothing more than a humble member of the clergy, but wouldn't you say that academic study is a human pursuit that attempts to uncover the world's structure and laws?"

"That is how I conceptualize it, yes," said Yuui with a nod.

"But isn't that strange? How are academics capable of such a thing?"

"I don't understand your question."

"Who guaranteed that the world even has structures and laws?"

"....."

"Even the thought that the world has set rules is predicated on the belief that someone—in other words, a creator, a god—made the world. Don't you agree?"

"No... We don't require a guarantee," Yuui argued back. "Both structure and laws are naturally discovered through a series of objective observations. That is the foundation of academia."

"Then why do people conduct those observations? Don't they do so because they believe that the world does have structures and laws?" said Mellay slowly. "Or, if they do discover a law through their observations, what allows them to be certain of it? Do academics not even slightly consider the possibility that it was all some massive coincidence?"

"...I'm not sure I understand what you mean."

"That is exactly why theology is the foundation of all other academic

disciplines. It's not a question of which is above the other. Sometimes, we come to better understand the scriptures thanks to the advancement of academic study." Mellay stopped a moment, then said, "But that is why I feel like all academics hold faith deep in their hearts. That faith is perhaps more genuine than that of people like me. It is a drive to reach an absolute truth, like staring into the sky at the stars you'll never reach and praying..."

The word "*genuine*" echoed inside Yuui's mind, while she thought what Mellay said was interesting.

The moment she heard that word, her thoughts didn't turn to priests or academics. She thought of some wandmakers she knew.

They didn't make wands to fulfill their own desires or even as a service to their clients. They made wands for the sheer sake of making them.

Were the stars still the same where they were looking...?

It suddenly dawned on Yuui how you could make wandmakers members of the clergy like Mellay talked about earlier. It may come down to the similarities between the two.

Wandmakers were normally subject to the strict regulations of the Guild, and they lived lives similar to priests or monks. Which meant that, on the outside, they met the requirements to be clergy. The issue was the requirements on the inside, which was essentially proof that all wandmakers had a devout faith in God. That wasn't all that difficult, either.

All you had to do was create an interpretation where the "ideal wand" that wandmakers pursued and "God" were one and the same. Or you could simply argue that the "third arm" that makes an appearance in the scriptures is God telling the Maray Church to wrap things up quite neatly. That would be all it would take for the Church to absorb the craftsmen.

Once Yuui realized that, she got goose bumps.

She felt like she'd touched on the edge of why Marayism was so widely followed and why the Church invaded country after country.

It was because they swallowed everything.

For example, if some new discovery that created an inconsistency with the scriptures came to light, they wouldn't refute either the scriptures or the knowledge. Instead, they would hold a meeting, just like now. There, they would treat the scriptures as an absolute truth while adjusting the interpretation of them to conform with the times.

The same thing was happening now. There was no resistance to the Church bringing wandmakers into the clergy. And if they needed to, they would "interpret" the scriptures through logic and reason. This was how the Maray Church historically operated.

And then..., thought Yuui, casting her eyes down.

Even your ability to stargaze would be attributed to the existence of God.

They believed in an absolute and unchanging truth. They were convinced that they would someday be able to connect everything into one because the world had been created by a single god. They were trying to absorb everything in the world, along with certainty.

That was the true strength of Marayism. The Lukuttans were completely different. You could never arrive at those same conclusions in the faith from Yuui's homeland.

And there were no stronger ideological grounds in the fight for national supremacy. The people who didn't follow Marayism were just people to be pitied. Marayists didn't hesitate to invade and indoctrinate them.

They arrived at the location of the dinner while Yuui was still thinking, though it turned out it was taking place in the same building in which all the other meetings were held. The same building and the same room. The only difference was how light it was outside and how the furniture was arranged.

5

There was a single long table running down the middle of the room with chairs on both sides. In front of each chair were plates and silverware. Participants were already gathering there, and quiet chatter bubbled up here

and there.

Ix and Shuno were led to the seats at the very end of the table. In terms of layout, that meant they were sitting in the spots reserved for the least important attendees, but that wasn't what they had a problem with.

"Wait, wait, wait a second!" said Shuno in a stifled cry, a feat of no small skill. Even so, they sat next to Ix and brought their face close to his. "What's going on here? How many people are attending this meal?"

"Uh...", said Ix as he looked down the table.

"I'm not telling you to count them!" Shuno grabbed Ix's face and turned it back toward them. "Didn't that Seyoh guy say he was inviting us here tonight because he wanted to talk to us a bit? How did that turn into this giant event?"

"He never said we were the only guests," replied Ix, his expression unchanged.

"And who are all these people anyway? Man, we are totally in the wrong place..."

Shuno dropped their head into their hands, which was actually what made them stand out even more. Several people were already staring at them. Some were regarding them with suspicion, almost asking why they were even sitting there. Even the two apprentices didn't know why they were here, so the other guests must have been even more confused.

"Dammit, I thought we were just getting some dinner..." Shuno stared into the distance, their eyes filled with resentment.

Diagonally from them on the other end of the table sat Seyoh, the person who'd invited them. He made no move to introduce the two of them to anyone. He instead simply chatted with a smile on his face to the guests nearby.

The moment Ix walked into the room, though, his attention turned to someone else. They were sitting across from Seyoh, which meant they were on the same side of the table as Ix and Shuno, just with several guests in between. They were the only person in the room whose face was concealed, yet not a single one of the other people in the room seemed to question this. It was strange for someone to wear their coat inside, and they appeared to be a fairly

small person.

Ix thought this might be someone he knew well, but the other guests were in the way, so he had no way of confirming.

“Anyway, I think our only choice is to stay as quiet as we can and try not to draw any attention,” said Ix.

“I’m with you on that. Don’t stand out, stay quiet the whole time.” Shuno nodded.

But the moment they decided that, their luck seemed to take a turn for the worse as two far more attention-grabbing people entered the room.

“Ha-ha-ha, I’m here!” came a shout along with the sound of the door opening forcefully.

Everyone except Ix turned toward the door.

Two very similar-looking men stood there as if looking down on everyone in the room. One of them had an arrogant smile plastered on his face, and the other wore an irritated frown.

“Oh, come on, don’t all stare at me at once! I’ll be making more of a scene later. Just sit back and relax until then!” said the smiling man, not the least bit perturbed by all the attention. “My name’s Rolphie! This guy next to me is Hemsley. Have you heard of us? Well, even if you haven’t, I don’t care, you know?”

Rolphie walked into the room, an arm around Hemsley’s shoulder.

But as they were about to pass behind Ix and Shuno, they stopped. Ix’s hands automatically clenched into fists.

“Hey, is that the moron?” asked Rolphie. Oblivious to Ix’s reaction, he placed a hand on his head without hesitation and leaned over to look at him. “Whoa, it is the moron! Hey, Hemsley! The numbskull’s here! You are him, right? What the hell are you doing here?”

Ix’s only response was to pull in his chin slightly.

“Ha-ha-ha, your face looks the same as always, like you just got back from a funeral! Are you still wearing your mourning clothes? But you know, since I

happened to bump into you, I should tell you...nothing! 'Cause why would I have anything to say to you? Ha-ha-ha!"

This time, Ix didn't react at all. He just let out a slow breath.

"Well, at least take in my awesome figure while you're here! I would've thought even a moron could do that much!" Rolphie lightly smacked Ix's head a couple of times. "Hemsley, you say something, too!"

"Nothing to say."

"Ah well!"

Then the two walked pompously off to their seats almost exactly in the center of the table. Rolphie immediately picked up a utensil at his place, called a servant over, and ordered them to do something.

Everyone else in the room was dumbfounded for a moment, but the chatter resumed with lively force once Rolphie and Hemsley had settled into their seats.

The primary topic was those two, perhaps with a bit of Ix thrown in.

"They're super rude, calling you a moron the minute they see you," whispered Shuno with a frown. "Cheer up, Ix—you're not a fool."

"...We had the same master; they're my seniors," said Ix, managing to get that much out.

"Oh, really?" said Shuno, their fist in front of their mouth. "Then you must have...uh...had a hard time. With stuff."

"You could say that..."

Ix had heard they were in town, but he hadn't expected to run into them this soon. The only good thing was they weren't sitting nearby each other...

Ix didn't get along with those two very well. Well, he didn't really get along with any of the other apprentices, but these two were special. They called him a moron whenever they met, though that wasn't all of it. The real thing was that Ix just felt like they were very different people. He couldn't understand wandmakers who had no interest in wands. He found they rarely understood each other, and he preferred to just not talk to them.

Several other people came into the room and took their seats. A few places were still unoccupied, but the servants came and cleared away the dishes in front of those.

After the drinks eventually came, Seyoh stood.

“I would like to thank you all for responding to my invitation on such short notice,” he said, sweeping his eyes about the room. “I believe you all may be able to guess without my explanation as to why I have decided to hold this dinner. But first, let us eat. The questioning and accusations can come afterward.”

While Seyoh spoke, Rolphie stared at him meaningfully. Despite being the target of that look, Seyoh sat down, leaned back in his chair, and gave an unafraid smile.

The food was brought out. Each dish was simple but delicious, in contrast with the extravagance implied by the massive room. Neither farming nor hunting was possible at the moment due to the season, so the dishes all utilized preserved foods. The cook must have been quite skilled to achieve such exquisite flavors with those limitations.

The room was filled with lively chatter, though it was almost entirely idle gossip. Ix could intuit based upon what the guests were talking about that many of them were Marayist. The topic of Heaven’s Worship came up, though it wasn’t discussed at any significant length.

As the meal continued, the conversations switched to primarily discussions with the person sitting next to you. The atmosphere of the room also seemed to loosen.

“Man, that was nice. I’m glad we came,” said Shuno, smiling from ear to ear beside Ix as they brought more food to their mouth. Their nervousness from earlier was completely gone. “Hey, aren’t you going to eat?” they said, pointing at Ix’s plate. “Oh-ho, do you not like this food? Weeell, I’m not that picky, but I’m pretty sure you shouldn’t leave anything on your plate at an event like this. I’ve got no choice, then, I’ll just take—”

“No, I’ll eat it,” said Ix.

“Really? You will? All of it...?”

“...I guess I’m fine with just one piece. You have the rest for me,” said Ix. Shuno was practically beaming.

“Ah, you’re really giving them to me?”

“Yeah.”

“...Really? You’re not going to extort me later?”

“I won’t, so just take them already. It’s not enough to make up for it anyway.”

“Make up for what?” asked Shuno while happily chewing away.

“Nothing.” Ix shrugged.

He looked forward again and saw the person sitting across the table staring at him. He was a middle-aged man, his hair thinning slightly. He’d been engaged in a heated discussion with another guest until just a moment ago.

As Ix grew confused, Shuno noticed the man as well. They looked back and forth between Ix and the man, furrowing their brow in unease.

“I-is he angry or something?” Shuno whispered in Ix’s ear. “Maybe we’re not supposed to give food like that...?”

“It’s a possibility,” he agreed.

The two of them looked at the man, and he suddenly gave them a gentle grin.

“Ah, apologies for staring. It’s rude of me,” he said. “The two of you were just making me smile. You must be friends?”

“Y-yes,” said Shuno with a glance at Ix. “Right?”

Ix nodded without saying anything.

“Yes, we’re close friends,” said Shuno boldly.

“And why are you at this dinner? I heard earlier that Seyoh invited you.”

“That’s right; he asked us here. We didn’t realize it was going to be this large of an event, though.”

“Oh...?” The man nodded, looking somewhat surprised. “May I ask the reason why you were invited? You don’t appear to be from Estosha...”

“Ah, well, the thing is, ummm...,” said Shuno, uncertain as to whether or not they could talk about the underground passage.

They struggled to find an explanation, so Ix said, “We’ve been going to the monastery. To make staffs.”

“Oh, I see, that explains it,” said the man with a nod, deciding all on his own that that was sufficient. He adjusted his position in his chair and clasped his hands atop the table. “You must be two very promising craftspeople to be taking a job at the monastery at your age. I can understand why Seyoh would invite you. He does like young and brilliant people.”

“Th-thank you,” said Shuno with a slight bow.

“But if that is the case...are you content not joining their conversation?” asked the man with a hand raised to indicate the center of the table. There were many people there gathered in rambunctious chatter. Both Seyoh and Rolphie were participating. Although whether you could say Hemsley was also joining in was a matter of opinion.

“What do you mean?” asked Ix, turning his eyes back to the man.

“I’ve been gloriously defeated,” said the man with a self-deprecating smile. “It is the inner circle that will attempt to solidify a decision while I’m not there. The majority of people have already been swept up by Mellay’s assertions. Even if I tried to make a counterargument, my voice wouldn’t reach them from all the way over here on the end. That might very well be the real reason for holding this dinner. In the normal meetings, the participants aren’t divided like this. I should have realized it the moment I was led to this seat... All that’s left is to determine who was responsible.”

Ix and Shuno glanced at each other, not understanding what the man was saying.

“Oh, look at me running off complaining,” he continued with a sigh. “They’re discussing the possibility of treating wandmakers as members of the clergy over there.”

“Wh-what?” shrieked Shuno, but it was blotted out by a laugh that erupted from somewhere else. “Wh-what does that mean?”

“I suppose I can’t help but tell you...,” he said.

There were a lot of vague sections in his explanation, as if he was trying to conceal something, but the general gist was that some of the members of the Church were debating that topic.

“If that was to happen, you wandmakers would find yourselves under a variety of restrictions. In your shops and in your daily lives as well. You would be significantly less free than you are now,” he said.

“B-but it’s just a debate, right?” said Shuno. “Even if something like that is decided in a place like this, it couldn’t possibly make any difference to all the different places in the country.”

“...Of course not. It’s best for you to think that,” said the man with a sad smile.

“He looks like he’s trying to tell us something, but why does it also seem like he’s pitying us?” Shuno asked Ix in a quiet voice. “B-but it’ll be fine, right? It’s not like they can decide something that huge at a meeting in a place like this...”

“Either way, there’s nothing we can do about it.” Ix shrugged. “Even if the world changes, it’s not the kind of problem that people like us can do anything about. This kind of thing is decided by people in another world.”

“What do you mean, *‘in another world’*?”

“Well, above, probably.”

“Above?”

Ix pointed up, and Shuno followed along to stare at the ceiling, then turned back to Ix’s face.

With a wrinkle between their brow, Shuno said, “There’s nothing up there...”

Yuui noticed when Ix and the person who’d been with him that one night showed up. She didn’t know why they were here, but she was worried he’d gotten himself dragged into something unpleasant again.

Currently, however, she was Minaha, not Yuui, so she wasn't in a position to casually address him. She would put him in greater danger if her true identity was discovered. With that in mind, she kept quiet. It was a blessing that they were sitting so far away from each other. He would surely realize who she was if he heard her voice.

But even if they weren't in this situation, Yuui likely wouldn't have been able to speak with him. It was taking every ounce of her energy to keep up with the debate unfolding before her eyes.

The transition happened naturally.

That was true for Yuui, who already knew what was happening, so the others surely didn't feel any discomfort with it. They probably never even realized that Mellay was shaping the direction of their arguments.

The conversation moved so naturally, almost as if it was to be expected, from idle gossip to the topic of the treatment of wandmakers. There was the discussion of the distinction of magic beasts in Marayism; then the five-legged beast was mentioned, which brought up the topic of wands. The same logic Mellay spoke of before was leading the debate to the same conclusion.

Yuui watched it happen in silence. There wasn't even a tiny gap for her to make a counterargument.

The scary thing was that Mellay looked as if she was almost entirely uninvolved. She offered the occasional remark here and there but kept it to a short comment or a quiet murmur, as though she were only half-heartedly participating in the debate.

But for Yuui, who had been focusing intently on the discussion, it was clear. Mellay's remarks were the turning points that nudged the conversation in the direction she wanted it to go, as if it were gently rolling toward that conclusion.

Actually, she wasn't quite leading the discussion. It was unfolding naturally. Anyone who thought about it would eventually reach the same conclusion. Mellay was more like a gentle wind, pushing on the backs of any who got lost along the way. That was the small amount of guiding she did.

Small amount?

What constituted a small amount?

Yuui wanted to laugh at her own thoughts.

How many calculations and how much preparation had been needed to make that “small amount” possible?

Yuui had spent her life so far being swept along the whole time, wrapped up in the expectations and plans of someone above. She had become just a pawn like that, and all she could do was adapt to the environment she was placed in.

Her life was not her own... She already knew that.

Even so, she'd had this tiny sensation that she'd managed to take back some of that during the events of the summer and fall. She'd expanded the range she could operate in and thought she would be able to do something within that space. If she had to admit it, she actually thought she, too, could join that world above. That was the reason she'd gone along with the suggestion that she return to Lukutta.

But seeing this now, all she could do was laugh. It turned out that the world above, which she's been only vaguely aware of, was a horrifying place.

“But would it be good to make wandmakers clergy? They don't know how to comport themselves as members of the Church,” said someone.

“The current Guild lays down strict standards in order for one to become a craftsman. I hear that most of the more unreserved types are turned away,” replied another.

“But there is the problem of their faith,” said yet another. “Obviously, they are followers of Marayism, but do they have the faith sufficient enough to join the religious bureaucracy?”

They all fell into thought. Eventually, someone said something that acted as a trigger for others to say no not this, no not that, and the discussion grew even more complex.

Once they all finished saying what they wanted to say, there was a moment of silence.

“We do have wandmakers here, after all.”

The voice came from that one particular elderly woman. It wasn't something said to the entire group, more like something murmured to the person sitting next to her. But since she said it in the single brief moment when everyone was silent, it seemed to ring out like a revelation.

"That's right, we do," someone said as they nodded.

"Those apprentices of Munzil's could very well act as representatives of wandmakers...", whispered another.

The participants' eyes naturally fell on the wandmakers at the table, on the pair of men who looked so alike, the boisterous one and the reticent one.

The two were engaged in conversation, or rather, there was a one-sided conversation occurring. Then they noticed everyone looking at them, and one raised a loud voice.

"I see, so you want to ask me something? Ha-ha, good! I'll allow a few questions!"

Some of the guests glowered at Rolphie's tone, but it wasn't enough of a hindrance to hold back the current flow of the debate.

One of the theologians cleared their throat and said, "I hope I'm not stepping on any toes if I go first. What do you wandmakers normally hold in your hearts while you are crafting wands? Is it the face of your client? The money you may receive? Or perhaps...your faith in God?"

"Ha-ha, what a dumb question!" cried Rolphie with a laugh. "All craftsmen think of the same thing: the ideal wand, obviously! Right?"

Rolphie hit Hemsley's shoulder, and he nodded.

"The ideal wand...?" The theologian grimaced. "And you are both the same?"

"Well, about that," said Rolphie as he placed the palms of his hands flat on the table, "I'm incredibly interested in how much I could sell the ideal wand for, and this guy next to me is searching for the ideal wood."

"My apologies for adding another question, but what is the ideal wand? What exactly does that look like?"

"Huh, you don't know? The ideal wand's right here in this town!"

“What?”

“Why don’t you think about it in that head of yours a bit before you open your mouth?” Rolphie pointed down. “It’s under the Chapel! That’s the ideal wand, the ultimate wand!”

“That...is true in the stories, but is it actually true?”

“It is,” said Rolphie with a self-confident nod.

“In other words, all wandmakers are pursuing that wand?”

Yuui secretly wondered what this wand underground was, but the guests were buzzing. It was probably a story that those connected to the Church knew.

But at that point, a voice came from the opposite end of the table from Yuui.

“Wait.”

Looking that way, she saw the gray-haired man stand up, his hands on the table.

Ix..., she thought as she looked at his profile.

“What do you mean when you say that’s the ultimate wand?” said Ix, staring directly at Rolphie, heedless of all the eyes that were locked on him.

“...What do you mean, *‘What do you mean’?*” parroted Rolphie.

Yuui looked at him and was frightened. There wasn’t a single hint of the smile that had been on his face a moment before. His expression was as cold as ice as he stared back at his fellow apprentice.

“Did you actually see that catalyst?” asked Ix.

“Yeah, I did,” replied Rolphie with a nod.

“And it’s the ultimate wand?”

“Yep.”

“How can you say that?”

“You’re a moron because you can’t figure it out yourself.” It wasn’t Rolphie who said that but Hemsley beside him. He was still looking directly forward, his expression as irritated as ever. “You’ll never be able to see it unless you fix

that.”

“...Fine.”

After seconds that felt as long as hours, Ix quietly took his seat again.

Yuui felt the tension in her body drain away. It wasn't like they'd been pointing wands at each other or even really arguing, but Yuui's palms were slicked with sweat regardless.

It seemed like that might have been the same for the other guests as well, because many of them were gaping at the two.

Yuui cautiously looked toward Ix, trying to keep the others from noticing. His expression was as unchanged as ever, and he was speaking quietly to the person beside him.

Afterward, the debate started up again like people happened to remember it. In the somewhat relaxed atmosphere, it proceeded largely as expected, as Mellay had planned. They came to the interpretation that the wandmakers who sought the ultimate wand were the same as the clergy who held their faith in God.

“But wands are not God. It would be one thing if God had given us wands, but it was Rednoff who created them. A human. To interpret those two as one and the same...,” countered one priest, and a few other attendees nodded in agreement. Even those who had been pushing that argument so far grimaced at the statement and said nothing.

That's when a white hand rose into the air.

“May I speak for a moment?”

“O-of course, Mellay,” said the priest nervously as he gestured toward her with an open hand.

“Thank you. It has struck me that perhaps you are all forgetting the stories.”

“Hmm, what do you mean...?”

“According to the legend, Rednoff was alone for a long time in the room below the Chapel where he made wands.”

This was the first time Yuui had heard anything about this room below the Chapel or these wands, but she guessed it had something to do with the priest's notes she'd read that morning.

Mellay asked the other guests to think about it, then said, "Below the Chapel. If that isn't a display of faith on par with martyrdom, then what is it? And his success in creating the ultimate wand was nothing short of divine inspiration at work."

Everything clicked for the guess as they listened to what she said.

"Striving for the ultimate wand is, to wandmakers, the same as striving to be like Rednoff," she continued. "Is their drive to emulate his faithful heart at the time not the purest form of faith? That is what I think anyway..."

There was no need to even check. Everyone was completely convinced.

Mellay's tone was hesitant. She'd never broken the illusion that other people were driving the debate, and now it seemed that she was simply mentioning a random thought that had struck her. That actually had the opposite effect of lending her words great persuasive power. Now it appeared that Mellay, who had held back until now despite the authority her voice typically carried, had wrapped up the entire discussion.

No one else voiced dissenting opinions. The next meeting wouldn't have any debate; it would only be for confirmation.

With this, wandmakers would be subsumed by the Church once the New Order successfully stepped into power.

Yuui glanced in Ix's direction again.

Just moments before he had raised an opposing voice against Rolphie. He'd seen this "ultimate wand" or whatever it was.

What sort of wand was it? Was it a marvel of a catalyst worthy of being the target of every wandmaker's aspiration? Or...

“All right, let’s get to the real topic of the day!”

When Rolphie shouted that, everyone present glanced at him suspiciously, even Ix and Shuno.

The dishes had already been cleared away, and the guests were being served after-dinner tea. Steam wafted up from the hot tea, but the room was already warm enough that drinking the beverage was causing them to sweat slightly.

“Real topic? Does that mean that wasn’t all of it?” asked Shuno, their head cocked. “They’re making us members of the clergy, aren’t they? Whether they actually can or not is another discussion.”

“That’s what it sounded like to me...,” said Ix, just as confused.

Rolphie, acting very casual and in control, crossed his long legs, sniffed the fragrant tea, and took a tiny sip. He returned the teacup to the table and looked around the room.

“Oh, yes. There was still that topic,” said Seyoh, clasping his hands together. “I got completely swept away by the other subject, my apologies.”

“I don’t need your apologies yet!” shouted Rolphie with one arm open wide. “Because soon, you’re going to be apologizing to each and every person here!”

Seyoh shrugged and stood.

“As you have all been informed, a few days after the last meeting, a letter was delivered to me. The contents were clear and simple: ‘There is a plan moving ahead to blow away this building.’ And you likely know this as well, but a few days before, Miss Minaha here,” said Seyoh, indicating the person in a coat sitting across from him, “was attacked by someone while traveling down the road. Thankfully, she was unharmed, but we do know that the assailant used magic against her. I have thoroughly investigated both cases but have been unable to determine the culprit. Have I missed anything?”

Seyoh smiled at the room, then continued.

“And what Rolphie speaks of is his accusation that I am responsible for both of these events. Which, if true, is quite a serious issue.”

Laughter could be heard in the room from no one in particular. But it died out

quickly as strangely loud guffaws burst forth. That was from Rolphie, of course.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha, great explanation!” he said, then stood up forcefully. He started walking slowly around the table. “First just let me say: I have zero interest in this! I don’t care who sent the letter or who attacked whomever it is over there! The only reason I’m going out of my way to explain this is because you lot have gotten really pathetic for not realizing who it is by now. Which means I’m saying this all out of the goodness of my own heart! Reflect on that and don’t forget your gratitude while you listen very closely!”

His speech was accompanied by overexaggerated gestures and waved hands.

“Despite all that, I don’t feel like going into all the annoying details of proof and motive and whatnot! The culprit is obvious even without all that!”

“Obvious...you say,” said Seyoh, still standing. He walked down the other side of the table from Rolphie so he was almost directly across from him. “Then let me ask, what leads you to claim that I am responsible for the first incident?”

“Everything. The letter was delivered, right? To this building? Otherwise known as your home. Early in the morning,” said Rolphie.

“Yes, that is correct.”

“Where exactly was it delivered to?”

“I was told it was placed outside the entrance...,” said Seyoh, puzzled.

“You must get tired playing dumb like that all the time.” Rolphie swept his hair up. “So how did you read that letter? A letter that, if placed on the piles of snow, would have gotten so damp you couldn’t read it?”

Ix saw everyone’s expressions grow cold in that moment.

“...It wasn’t that damp,” replied Seyoh in a calm tone. “The servants likely picked it up just after it was placed there.”

“That is an incredible coincidence!” Rolphie clapped his hands. “But the person who sent it was a serious moron, weren’t they? Come on, putting a letter on the snow?!”

“My servants open the front entrance every day at the same time. It is possible the sender investigated before sending.”

“Someone who’s sending a tip-off letter? That’s thinking pretty far ahead for something like that!”

“Or, and I don’t say this because I personally believe it, but the culprit may be one of my servants.”

“Ah, so then you don’t recognize the handwriting of one of the very few servants of yours who can actually write and didn’t bother investigating it after the letter was delivered?”

“...Is that all the proof you have for your accusations?”

“Didn’t I say that we wouldn’t need anything as bothersome as proof? Even a child knows if you put paper on the snow, it’ll get wet. There’s not any proof of that.”

Rolphie and Seyoh glared at each other.

Eventually, Seyoh cleared his throat and said, “Then what about the second incident? Is it obvious that I attacked Minaha?”

“Of course it is! It’s even more obvious than the last one!” Rolphie pointed at the person in a coat. “It’s not like anyone would attack a person whose name and face they don’t even know!”

The room fell utterly silent.

Seyoh blinked in confusion and said, “...Is that your reason?”

“What about it don’t you understand? The attack was clearly targeting her specifically, yeah? Only someone who knows what’s under the hood would do that. Which is you. Can you think of any other possibilities?”

“I can think of a few.”

“Then give them here; I’ll shoot down every single one.”

“The assailant was attacking at random. The assailant had learned Minaha’s true identity elsewhere. The assailant was a member of the meetings and trying to eliminate her despite not knowing her true identity,” said Seyoh, listing off example after example.

“Would someone who’s intelligent enough to have a wand attack people at

random in broad daylight? Nope. You're the only person who knows her identity, so where exactly is someone else going to find out who she is? And seriously? A participant in the meetings? They attacked even though they knew you were on high alert because of the threat letter? Are there any actual morons here? Other than *the* moron."

"....."

It seemed Rolphie had forced Seyoh into submission by refuting his ideas so quickly.

Listening to this conversation was enough to give Ix a general idea of what was happening. As it played out, he'd gone from wondering what Rolphie was blabbering about to feeling like he was actually on to something.

In reality, Rolphie's argument was absurd. Anyone could poke as many holes in the defense as they wanted, but it was Seyoh giving up on defending himself that seemed the most convincing proof.

But just then, a voice came from beside Ix.

"E-excuse me."

Ix looked over to see Shuno timidly raising their hand.

"What now?" Rolphie glowered at the sudden interruption. "Ah, whatever. You can speak."

"Well, according to the conversation from before, you think that the 'blow the building away' thing is just random nonsense, but...I saw it. There's blast powder in the passage below the city."

"Blast powder...?" asked everyone in the room, including Rolphie.

Of course, Ix had never heard of the stuff before. But he did think he knew what Shuno was talking about—the casks they'd found in the passage that contained a sand-like substance.

"Y-yes," said Shuno with a gulp. "It's a specialized powder that will explode when you apply pressure and expose it to flame. I saw it underground."

"Was there enough to provide the force necessary to destroy the building?" asked the man across from them in a calm tone.

“U-uh, well... There wasn’t all that much, and it was already damp... B-but it might’ve been part of some plot.”

“Right,” said Rolphie, though he nodded in an uninterested way. “Unless I’m wrong, this blast powder or whatever has nothing to do with this incident. Be quiet now.”

“H-huh? But—”

“I agree,” came a voice that Ix knew well.

It belonged to Minaha, the woman in the coat. She was going by a different name, but her tone of voice and speech patterns were exactly the same as the girl he knew as Yuui.

Everyone turned their attention on her, the girl who hadn’t spoken up even when the topic centered on her.

“Are you a blast wandmaker?” she asked Shuno.

“How do you know that name...?” Their eyes grew wide. “N-no, I’m not. I make magic wands.”

“In all likelihood, the blast powder that you saw was used long ago when that passage was dug. It’s just leftovers.”

“H-how can you even claim that?”

“I do not know how powerful blast powder is, and I have never seen that underground tunnel. But I do have one question. During the time when that passage was constructed, by which I mean when the Chapel was built, were magic techniques advanced enough to bore through the earth?”

“W-well, it would be difficult...,” said Shuno, their voice growing quieter and quieter.

“Then which do you think is more likely: Someone obtained old technology and secretly transported it underground, or that the materials from that time period were left there? Time passes more gently beneath the earth.”

Once she finished speaking in nearly one breath, she held her hands in front of her as if she were handing back the spotlight. Rolphie took the opportunity to start speaking again, waving his arms.

Shuno seemed to almost shrink into themselves as they put their hands on their knees. No one was paying attention to them anymore.

“You okay?” asked Ix. “You were thinking of everyone in the room when you spoke; I doubt they think badly of you.”

“Yeah, I’m fine... Actually, maybe I’m not,” Shuno said with a weak smile. “Do you mind going outside with me for a bit? It feels really stuffy in here...”

8

When Ix and Shuno stepped quietly out of the room, Ix saw someone he recognized.

People who looked like the attendants of the dinner guests were standing outside the room. Among them was Nova, the girl who had been tasked with monitoring and guarding Yuui.

Ix wasn’t sure if he should talk to her, but she nodded slightly when she saw him looking at her, then glanced out the window.

“I shouldn’t have butted in...,” said Shuno as they walked on unsteady feet. “I’m going to get some fresh air.”

“I’ll come with you to the entrance,” said Ix as he nodded back toward Nova.



They descended the stairs and stepped out of the building. The difference in temperature between outside and inside was greater than expected, so Ix pulled his coat tight around him.

Shuno told him they were going to take a walk around the area. Ix waited there and heard the door opening behind him. He turned back to see Nova, expressionless as ever.

“Why is Yuui here?” he asked without any preface. “I thought she went back to Lukutta.”

“This was a condition, for her return.”

“I didn’t hear anything about any conditions.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“...What’s the condition?”

“That she participate, in the theological meetings in this town.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. But I’ve been told that once this is over, she really will return to Lukutta.”

“I don’t get it...” Ix folded his arms and looked up at the sky. “What’s the point of making Yuui participate, and with her true identity hidden at that? Since you’re here, she’ll still continue to cooperate with the New Order, and her having royal blood carries no sway in the Kingdom.”

He turned his head and noticed Nova staring at him. Her expression hadn’t changed, but she seemed like she wanted to say something.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“Did Yuui, tell you?” asked Nova.

“Tell me what?”

“Did Yuui say she had royal blood?”

“Uh, well...” Ix didn’t understand the point of the question but brought a hand to his mouth and searched through his memories. “It was...Tomah I heard it

from. I think he just told me she had some noteworthy ancestry without going into specifics.”

“Which means, she didn’t speak to you about it, herself?”

“Nova, what are you asking this for? Are you saying she doesn’t really have royal blood?”

“No, she does. But that isn’t the reason she’s valued in Lukutta. She comes from, another important bloodline.”

“Another?”

“Yes, she’s...”

When Ix heard Nova’s response, he was overcome with a horrible feeling of foreboding.

Though he had nothing in the way of proof to validate his hunch, it all fit together too perfectly.

He glanced around, but Shuno wasn’t back yet. He didn’t have time to wait.

“Sorry, Nova, I’m going back to the dinner,” Ix said as he opened the door. “Tell Shuno that when they get back. They’re the person I was with.”

“Okay.”

Leaving her behind as she nodded, he ran up the stairs and went back in the room they were in before.

Very few people noticed to Ix when he reentered. Most of them were focused on the debate playing out between Rolphie and Seyoh in the middle of the room, the one was already supposed to have been settled.

Rolphie was spreading his arms out and shouting.

“Guys, I’m both screaming and crying here! How the hell did none of you realize such a simple thing?! He wanted someone to figure it out! That’s why he was so sloppy!”

“S-Seyoh, is this true?” said one guest with a shake of their head. “Did you really pretend to attack Minaha to see if there was anyone who bore her ill will?”

“It is as you say,” replied Seyoh with a smile. “I assumed that if there was someone among the participants like that, they would attempt to contact me afterward. But no one appeared. I do apologize for testing everyone like that, but this means we are finally ready for the next meeting.”

“Ready...?”

Seyoh ignored the man who muttered and walked over to stand behind Yuui, the person in the coat. She raised her head but didn’t react beyond that.

Everyone there watched him with bated breath.

“There is a debate that we must have—a debate for our future. But it concerns an incredibly delicate matter. Some of you may be sickened at the mere mention of it. But first, I wanted you to trust her.”

He placed a hand on her shoulder. Then he slowly rubbed her coat and moved his fingers to her hood.

“Let me introduce the real Minaha: Miss Yuui Laika.”

Yuui didn’t resist. She kept her hands on her knees and her back perfectly straight as he removed her hood.

Her dark skin, unlike anyone else’s in the room, had been exposed.

“I see, so she’s an easterner,” remarked the elderly vukodrak woman immediately. She waited a few seconds before filling the chamber with her calm voice. “Seyoh, I believe you were overly cautious, but you have magnificently achieved your goal. At this point, no one here has any negative feelings toward her. We can have a rational debate about easterners. Am I incorrect?”

She looked around the room, and everyone nodded. There were murmurs of agreement with Mellay and surprise that Yuui had such a deep understanding of Marayism.

But Seyoh disabused them of their assumption.

“Mellay,” he said, “you have come to the wrong conclusion. It is not the easterners themselves we must discuss, but their faith.” He smiled as he continued. “What I am most concerned with is how we interpret their beliefs when we enlighten them.”

“So then we will be hearing from Yuui herself? About the god they believe in and their doctrine?”

“No. Yuui is an example.”

“An example? Of what?” asked Mellay, her head cocked.



“A god.”

“What?”

Seyoh gestured toward Yuui’s face with his left hand. “This girl, Yuui, is a god. She is the descendant of a lineage that has the blood of a deity running through their veins. Or so the people in her homeland believe, of course.” He placed one hand on top of the other in front of him. “So then, how do we handle such a person? That is the discussion I wish to have at our next meeting, which will take place on the day of Heaven’s Worship.”

All eyes in the room were on Yuui.

What emotions were in them?

“...Is it true?” asked Mellay after struggling to find her words for a moment.

And the response: “...Yes.”

When Yuui nodded, no one else chose to speak again.

1

Regardless of what had transpired, Ix still had a job to do. He and Shuno went to the monastery the following day, but he couldn't focus on his work at all. He noticed that his hands had stopped moving, and he'd lapsed completely into thought. It was the first time something like that had ever happened to him.

He hadn't been able to do anything at that dinner.

Of course he couldn't. Considering his low social standing, it wasn't his place to say anything. But even if he had been a participant in the debates, he would have kept his mouth shut.

Ix hadn't known about Yuui. He hadn't tried to find out her secret. His only interest was in wands; he didn't care about his clients' situations, so long as he could keep crafting...

Ultimately, he'd only been able to watch as she was put in danger, then slink back to the monastery to make wands again, like he was running away.

He wondered what would happen to her.

Unfamiliar with the scriptures as he was, Ix did know it was a grave sin to claim you were a god. If they took Yuui to trial for this, she would lose an arm at best. Typically, this sort of crime led to a death sentence.

Chills ran through his entire body as he considered the possibility.

Would she be executed?

Was that why they had brought her here?

Had they tempted her with the prospect of returning to Lukutta only to lead her to the gallows?

"Can I help you with anything?" asked Beter. His face was half-visible as he

peered in from the doorway. He was smiling cheerfully. He was blissfully unaware of the meetings in the city and the underground passage. Seyoh had given him a random explanation as to why Ix and Shuno had gone missing.

“No, I’m okay,” said Shuno.

“Ix?” Beter looked at him, his head tilted. His table, which would normally be covered in wood shavings by now, was still clean.

Ix almost said nothing was wrong but stopped before he could get the words out. Instead, he brought a hand to his mouth and asked, “Can you...bring the three monks here? The ones I’m making staffs for?”

“Of course, I don’t mind at all, but...” Beter blinked, not understanding the reason for his request. “Is there an issue?”

“No, there’s not. I just kind of want to talk to them.”

“Okay! I’ll get them right away.”

For some reason, Beter’s smile glowed even brighter, and he left the room.

Ix wasn’t exactly sure why he’d asked this all of a sudden. But he wasn’t going to get any work done today, so he honestly just sort of wanted to hear what his clients had to say.

The first monk came quickly to the room. He’d been in the middle of work, so his clothes were dusty. “Is there a problem?” he asked, furrowing his brows with anxiety.

“It’s not that important.” Ix shook his head. “Could you take a seat?”

He looked at the monk as he sat down across from him. Ix had gotten into a bit of an argument with him about woodwork on the first day of the job.

“...I’m sorry about before,” said Ix, running fingers across his wandmaking tools.

“Huh?” The monk’s eyes opened wide in surprise.

“I complained about the treatment on your wood, even though you did your best to research and work it. That was impolite of me.”

“O-oh...” The man looked taken aback, his mouth agape. “No, don’t be sorry.

It was my fault for doing too much without a strong grasp of the fundamentals. Um, is that what you wanted to talk about?"

"No... Let's chat a bit more."

Despite Ix's insistence, he didn't have any specific questions to ask. They spoke about the staff a bit more.

"Honestly, I know how inconvenient this assignment is," said the monk at some point during the conversation.

"What do you mean?"

"I know how much staffs normally cost. The monastery isn't rich, so I'm sure you're not getting compensated enough. I bet you don't often make staffs for regular people like me."

"Well..." Ix brought a hand to his mouth. "The first staff I ever made was for a kid from a regular family; they weren't nobility or anything."

"That's amazing. And did it cost about as much as usual?"

"Uh...yeah."

Ix didn't mention that the order had been canceled due to some special circumstances.

They quickly ran out of things to chat about, so Ix told the monk he was free to go.

"Sorry for interrupting your work; you can head back," he said.

"Ah, okay..." replied the monk. He walked toward the door but then spun on his heel to face Ix again. "Um, thank you," he said with a deep bow.

"Huh?"

"I'm going to keep working hard to become someone deserving of the staffs you make."

Ix couldn't figure out what to say in response, so he just nodded and vaguely said, "Okay." The monk smiled and left the room.

After that, Ix talked to his other two clients. He didn't apologize to either of them, but oddly enough, they both thanked him before they left. Ix had no idea

why. It actually made him feel uncomfortable. He hadn't done anything to deserve their gratitude.

Time passed like that until noon came. Just as Ix started to head off toward the cafeteria with Shuno, Coaku suddenly called out to him.

"Ah, Ix, could you stay behind for a moment?" he asked.

"Sure, I don't mind..."

Ix told Shuno to go on ahead. Coaku offered him a seat in front of the fire, which he accepted. He gazed at the old man's face, wondering what he could want. The flames reflected off the old man's glasses, behind which he stared at Ix with narrowed eyes.

"It's good artem, isn't it?" said Coaku. "It's particularly high quality this year."

"Huh? ...Oh, yeah. The components are great." Ix was surprised for a moment but nodded. "Coaku, do you use the artem from here, too?"

"I would love to use some, but those trees belong to the monastery." He smiled sadly. "But the wood makes a good sound. And your shavings are smooth. Thanks to all the work you two put in, they'll make for great staves."

"...You saw our unfinished catalysts? When?" asked Ix with a frown.

"I haven't examined them. I planned on speaking up if there was an issue, but I have no doubts about either of your skills. A glance was enough to tell me as much. That's let me relax here."

Ix couldn't tell if Coaku really meant that or if he was just saying things while half-asleep. When they first met, they'd only exchanged a few words and a handshake, yet now the craftsman was implying that was all it had taken to evaluate Ix's skills. That didn't seem realistic.

"...Did you want something?" asked Ix, ignoring the other questions he had for the wandmaker.

"Sorry, I've gotten into the habit of prattling on as I've gotten older." Coaku brought a hand to his forehead. "I just wanted to tell you that you pass."

"Huh?"

Ix stared hard at Coaku's face. What was this all about?

But it wasn't just Ix who seemed to think this was strange. Coaku also scratched his head, looking befuddled.

"What do you mean, 'Huh?'...?" He adjusted his glasses and tilted his head. "Perhaps you didn't hear."

"I heard you the first time, but what are you talking about? What did I pass?"

"I approve of your registration as a craftsman."

"...What?"

Ix blinked several times. This was either the cruelest joke ever, or he'd misheard.

But Coaku didn't correct his last statement and simply said, "How odd. The Guild should have told you that this assignment doubles as an exam."

"Hold on a second." Ix turned his face to the side and held up a hand. "I don't understand... Shuno's the one being tested here."

"Of course they are." Coaku nodded. "I decided they passed on the very first day. I haven't told them as much, though."

"Passed...? What are you judging if you haven't seen the finished product?"

"I already told you that you have plenty of skill." He smiled. "There are all sorts of craftsmen. The ones who follow their own ideals, the ones who pursue money, they can do whatever they like. The important thing is to know what you're after. That's the only thing about you that I was uncertain about... But after seeing you today, I realized that wouldn't be a problem."

"Now I'm even more confused," said Ix, staring at the ground. "Today I was less steady than I've ever been."

"That's why. You seemed lost, but you'll probably be fine like that. Because up until now, you've just been drifting."

Ix had no idea what Coaku was saying. He was being contradictory.

Besides, there were more conditions required to become a craftsman than just passing the Guild exam.

“A shop... Yeah, I’m completely hopeless when it comes to having a shop,” said Ix, raising his head. “You need one to be a craftsman, right?”

“Which is why I told you I’d give you mine, but it seems you didn’t hear that, either.”

“Give your store...? To me?”

Impossible. Ix shook his head over and over. He couldn’t believe this stroke of good fortune would just fall into his lap. There had to be a mistake. Or maybe it was a trick.

“If you’re saying that,” said Coaku with a sad smile, “does that mean you don’t want to be a craftsman?”

“N-no, that’s not it. It’s just...”

Ix been aiming to complete his registration as a craftsman for ages. But he hadn’t been emotionally prepared for this revelation, so the first emotion to come to him was confusion, not happiness.

Seeing Ix’s flustered state, Coaku lowered his brows in uncertainty.

“Well, let’s just leave it at that for now,” he said as he got up. The craftsman leaned on his cane and bent his knees. “It seems like a good idea to give you some time before I ask for your final decision. We’ll both be here for the winter regardless. Take some time to mull it over.”

“O-okay.”

“To be honest, I would really like to leave my shop in your hands. You apprenticed under a good friend of mine and are a promising craftsman in the making. If there’s anything you’re unhappy with, or if you have any conditions about our arrangement, please let me know. I’ll do my best to accommodate them.”

“Yeah...,” said Ix, though he was no longer in a state where he could think about anything. He had no idea how to react to this reality.

But just before Coaku left the room, Ix remembered something he’d forgotten to ask.

“Earlier...,” he started.

“Yes, what is it?” asked the old man as he stopped and turned his face only to look back.

“You said you contacted me earlier, right?”

“I did.”

“Who did you send the letter to? Morna? Or maybe Layumatah?”

When Ix asked, Coaku only looked more confused and said, “They should be in town. Have you not met them?”

“You can’t mean...”

“Rolphie and Hemsley. I sent them numerous exchanges. I thought that was the reason they were in Estosha...”

2

Ix grabbed his lunch and went out of the cafeteria to find Shuno sitting in their usual spot. They were sitting in front of the pure-white landscape, silently moving the food around their half-empty plate.

“Hey, what did Coaku want to talk to you about?” asked Shuno as Ix sat down next to them. “He wasn’t lecturing you...was he? He seemed so nice before.”

“No... I’ll tell you about it later. I need some time to sort things out first.”

“O-oh? Are you okay? You can always talk to me if you need advice.”

“Yeah.”

Shuno glanced sideways at Ix several times. Though Ix noticed this, he just didn’t know what to say to his friend.

For a while, they ate in silence. A light snow fell to the ground, and a few flakes even landed on the back of Ix’s hands. They melted away immediately, as though they were never there in the first place.

“You’ve been like this ever since yesterday,” muttered Shuno. “Something happened when I left the room. Tell me about it.”

“...Someone I know is sort of...”

“...You can’t seriously think that explanation’s gonna cut it. Someone you know is sort of what?”

“Sort of in danger of getting killed.”

“Th-that’s pretty serious!” Shuno looked around. They were all alone, of course. “A-and? When?”

“What do you mean, ‘*When?*’”

“When are you going to go save them?”

Their quick response left Ix silent.

He couldn’t change the fact that Shuno could never truly understand. No matter how much Ix wanted to save Yuui, they were up against powerful opponents. They must have concocted an elaborate scheme to set her up like that. There was nothing a mere apprentice could do to stop them. He couldn’t even get into the meetings.

But if Ix explained everything to Shuno, he would get them involved, too. Just as he was concluded that it would be best to gloss over the issue and push it aside, his friend spoke up.

“You’ve already thought of a way to save them, haven’t you, Ix?”

“What makes you say that?”

“You’re not the type to show stuff on your face, but I can see that much right now. We’re good friends, after all. And because we’re so close, I can tell that you don’t know if you should go through with this, right? But this is exactly the kind of situation where I step in as your senior. So lay it on me! What do you need advice about?”

“Advice...?”

“I told you, didn’t I? That you shouldn’t hesitate to rely on me if you’re in trouble,” said Shuno, smiling proudly as they thumped their chest.

There was something encouraging about their face at that moment.

Nevertheless, Ix stared at the ground through the space between his knees for a while. A thin layer of snow settled on the back of his head before he finally

looked up.

“...I would be betraying someone I owe if I go through with my plan.”

“Someone you owe? Are you saying it’ll hurt them?”

“No, that’s not it. This person is no longer with us. But...they’re very precious to both the person I know and me. And this will disgrace them.”

“Hmm...” Shuno looked up at the sky. “This might be a flippant opinion, but isn’t the life of someone who still draws breath more important than the honor of someone who’s dead?”

“.....”

“Wow, this is quite the trifling conundrum you’ve got. How very you,” said Shuno with a sigh. “...I told you before I was planning on taking up the family business, right?”

“What’s this about?” asked Ix in surprise as he looked sideways at Shuno.

“Nothing, really.” They smiled wide. “Just...thought I’d distract you with a story. It’s about the blast powder from yesterday. You’ve never heard of blast wands before, have you?”

Ix shook his head, and Shuno grinned like they’d thought as much.

“They’ve been around for a long time, blast wands. My family’s made them for generations. That’s our trade, essentially,” said Shuno. “You were next to me yesterday when I spoke, so you probably know already, but there’s this substance called blast powder. It burns violently when you expose it to fire. If you get a lot together and apply pressure to it, the resulting explosion will be even larger. Depending on how you do it, you can wield some serious destructive force with the stuff. This has absolutely nothing to do with magic, by the way. Blast powder produces the same force regardless of who lights it. Blast wands were a type of weapon that used blast powder.”

“I’ve never heard of them.”

“They were deadly weapons back in the day. My dad and his dad were experts in the field. Blast wandmakers were pretty much the only ones who knew how to make them and how to produce the powder for them, plus the

only people who understood its effects. They were valued by their countries and treated pretty well, so enemy nations couldn't get them to betray their homelands. That was all until Rednoff invented man-made wands."

"Then the reason your family's business went bad..."

"Was because of magic wands. The business was already about to go under back when I was born."

"I don't want to interrupt, but did demand for blast wands really get that low?" asked Ix, his head cocked. "It sounds to me like they were pretty effective, with no difference in strength between users. Wouldn't people use them alongside magic wands for different things?"

"About that. Blast powder's super difficult to synthesize. You produce it by combining a few different substances together, but one of them is incredibly difficult to get ahold of. Difficult enough that you need the support of a nation to do it." Shuno sighed. "Unfortunately, that support dried up. Besides, the stuff just makes explosions... It can only be used for violence. But magic wands can be used over and over so long as the user has mana left, and they can do all sorts of things. Compared to that, blast wands are nothing. The kingdom went all in on fostering magic wandmakers, exacerbating the transition away from blast wands..."

"But you became an apprentice wandmaker."

"I wanted to learn about them. I wanted to get to know these magic wands that everyone talked so much about. Mom and Dad insisted I was betraying the family... But to me, it was plain as day which was the better of the two. I thought, *Ah, so this is why blast wands are going away*, and wanted to laugh. Ever since, I've been working to improve my craftsmanship.

"But you know. I was a bit happy to hear that conversation yesterday. Blast powder was useful for something, even if it was just digging that tunnel below the city. I'm not obsessed with blast wands or anything; I'm entirely focused on magic wands now. But...I dunno. So... Uh, what am I actually trying to say?"

"I thought you just wanted to distract me?"

"Well, there was that..." Shuno crossed their arms and grimaced. "Oh, that

was it. Here's the rub: your senior betrayed their living family. So you shouldn't care about being disloyal to someone who's dead. Or maybe you should care a little... Anyway, maybe it would be best for me to say you should just look the other way this time? When it comes down to it, I'll be with you in front of their grave apologizing."

"What the hell was that?"

Not even Ix could hold back a laugh of surprise at how contrived Shuno's explanation was.

But at the same time, he felt some of the tension slip away.

Seriously... What am I hesitating for? he thought.

He didn't have the sheer goodness that Yuui did, but he should at least be able to take on this much responsibility.

3

The pair moved away so no one would overhear them.

They left the monastery behind and slipped into the artemisia forest that surrounded it. The branches drooped under the weight of the white snow settled on the dark-green pine needles. Every once in a while, a branch near breaking would bend lower and shudder like a beast shivering, causing the snow to slough off.

"This is a nice forest," remarked Shuno.

"Yeah," replied Ix.

The trees were growing at regular intervals, and they had been trimmed of extraneous limbs. You could tell humans had carefully crafted this place. Ix suddenly recalled the mountain he'd grown up on, though the trees there were completely unsuited to wands, unlike the ones here.

As he reflected on that, he felt a very strange sensation.

Why was he here?

Why was a child who'd been abandoned on a winter's day now walking across the snow in this far-off place?

Ix told Shuno about his plan, though there wasn't really anything he needed from them. After that, he decided to ask more about blast wands. He suspected Shuno's knack for crafting had come from his familiarity with this older style of wand.

Perhaps certain theories applicable to blast wands and weapons that used blast powder were also relevant to magic wandmaking. Maybe Shuno had limitless ideas about crafting because they'd entered the field as an outsider, so they weren't constrained by its conventional wisdom.

"Well, blast wands are a weapon that..." said Shuno, speaking with their hands as much as their words. "You produce an explosion in a very sturdy tube, and the reaction shoots out a rock or something..."

"Reaction?"

"It's a secondary effect, yeah?"

It was a strange weapon, this wand that needed an explosive reaction to shoot something. In a magic catalyst, that would be considered a secondary effect. It seemed like blast wands weren't able to shoot out explosive force itself. What exactly did they look like?

At that point, his thoughts caught on something in the back of his mind.

Reaction...?

Shooting something out with a reaction?

He stopped in his tracks.

"Shuno..."

"What's wrong?" they asked after walking a couple of steps past Ix.

"Have you ever tried to make a magic wand using blast wand structures?"

"Bit and pieces, yeah... Which part are you talking about?"

"The 'shooting something out using a reaction' part. Couldn't you accomplish the same thing with mana?"

“Ah... Well,” began Shuno with a wry smile, “yeah, I’ve thought about it. I’ve put together different types of wood. One stick in the middle, with another around it to make the reactive force. But it doesn’t work, and you’d probably arrive at that conclusion yourself if you ran the calculations. The wand isn’t sturdy enough. It breaks if you try to output more magic power than it can handle. It wouldn’t pan out.”

“Oh, right...”

Though Ix nodded along with Shuno’s explanation, internally, he was confused.

No—Shuno was wrong.

What were they even saying?

Ix knew the wood wouldn’t withstand the blast. But that was only an issue if you were outputting the maximum amount of force. You could put a limiter in the wand to avoid that.

Why hadn’t Shuno realized that?

No, that wasn’t the question...

It wasn’t just Shuno.

This was an incredibly simple structure. Anyone could come up with it. It absolutely was not difficult from a technical perspective. People could have implemented it perfectly well a hundred years ago.

And yet...

Shuno, Ix’s fellow apprentices, and all the wandmakers in the world...

Had his own master not even thought of it...?

Ix brought a hand to his mouth.

He was shaking.

If his master had thought of it, he would have tried making it at least once.

But he didn’t even do that, despite being so close.

Which meant he really hadn’t thought of it.

Ix wondered why not but then shook his head.

Why not?

The reason was obvious:

Because all wandmakers sought the ultimate wand, their ideal catalyst.

Oh...

That's why.

That's why the wand underground was the ultimate wand.

Compared to something like that...

But that was it, wasn't it?

Use a magic reaction and put in something to limit the force.

You wouldn't need the fine skills of a craftsman or a careful selection of materials to produce it.

You could make large quantities of identical wands.

You could make an infinite number of catalysts, devoid of special characteristics.

Craftsmen would find no value in trying to make something like that.

It was worthless.

Or was it?

Was it truly worthless?

You could put that kind of wand in the hands of lots of people for cheap.

Did that really have no value?

Was Ix the only one who considered that valuable?

Possibly... Probably.

There was only a single person in the entire world who saw the worth in a wand like that.

Only a person without magic could understand it.

If he'd known how powerful magic was, he would have sought only to amplify its power further.

That's why everyone had considered the idea of a wand that could be mass-produced but had never tried to actualize it.

It was an idea any other craftsman would subconsciously dismiss.

The tips of Ix's fingers grew cold.

His excitement was drawing the blood from his extremities.

"Ix!"

That voice brought him back to reality.

Shuno was staring, their face right up to his.

"What's wrong?" asked Ix.

"What's wrong...? That's what I should be saying. What's wrong with you? I thought you'd lost consciousness with your eyes still open or something."

"Oh, really?" he asked vaguely with a nod.

Shuno gave him an anxious look. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine... I'm fine."

"Maybe you should take the afternoon off from work. Did you get enough sleep?"

"No, that's not it. I just..."

"Just...?" repeated Shuno.

"Just..."

Just what?

Just thought...of what?

"I just remembered something. The esne forest on the mountain I grew up on."

A type of wood that repelled mana.

They treated Yuui no differently after the incident. She stayed in the same room as always, and she had her meals brought to her. But now, she wasn't allowed out of her room, and Nova didn't come visit.

Yuui hadn't the faintest idea about what was going on outside her room or what the next conference would hold in store. She passed a day doing nothing but gazing out the window. Those days continued.

And then before she knew it, the time came.

Heaven's Worship. The day of the meeting where she would be tried.

Unlike every other time she'd attended, Yuui was the first person in the hall. The furniture had been rearranged from how it had been the night of the dinner to its typical setup, with chairs scattered throughout the darkened chamber. But there wasn't a seat for her. Instead, she was made to stand beside the wall.

She watched the participants trickle in one by one. As they entered, they would glance in her direction for a brief moment, then look away.

Quite a few had arrived already, but no one was doing any chatting. Mellay's arrival produced a slight murmur, but otherwise the participants kept their mouths shut tight.

Eventually, Seyoh opened the door and entered.

He walked to the small table in the center of the hall. The scribe took out their writing utensils and placed their left hand on the paper.

"The 934th meeting will now come to order," Seyoh announced gravely. "During our last conference, we decided that today's debate would concern the distinction between magic beasts and humans. However, now that we are here, we find ourselves with another topic at hand. I believe this concern to be of great urgency for these meetings and, as such, would like to discuss placing it at a higher priority. Please raise your hand if you have any questions or disagreements."

Seyoh swept his eyes slowly across the faces of the participants, but no one

raised their hand.

“Agreed?” he said, this time scanning the entire chamber. “The debate participants unanimously agree to change this meeting’s topic. Before we begin, I would like to announce that while I did invite Misters Rolphie and Hemsley to attend, they were unable to do so because of an urgent matter that arose.”

No one voiced the suspicion that their absence had been planned from the very beginning.

“Now then, we will discuss how to handle easterners who claim to be descended from a god. Please raise your hand if you wish to voice an opinion.”

This time, two or three people shot their hands up immediately.

The debate played out as Yuui had imagined it might. Except now there wasn’t anyone guiding it. It was running its natural course.

First, the participants confirmed the severity of the sin that claiming to be a god was in Marayism. Next, they accused Yuui of misrepresenting God by claiming to be a deity. The conversation was well laid out and proceeded without issue.

They were about to declare her guilty, with airtight logic at that.

Just as the debate was entering its final phase, there came a quiet knock at the door.

Seyoh, who had been in the middle of a sentence, stopped speaking and turned in the direction of the entrance. The servant standing in front of the door had a quiet conversation through it with whoever was on the other side, then hastily opened it.

“Apologies for interrupting,” said a small elderly man as he entered. He was leaning against a cane. From behind his small spectacles, his eyes swept across the faces of each person in the room in turn. “Might you allow me to impose for a moment?”

“Master Coaku?” said Seyoh as he strode quickly over to the old man’s side. Yuui had never heard Seyoh address someone more humbly. “What has brought you here so suddenly? I was under the impression you would be unable

to attend today due to work...”

“Well, that was the plan originally, but my schedule opened up,” responded the man in his gentle voice.

“I appreciate your coming out of your way to visit us, but unfortunately...,” said Seyoh as he rubbed his hands together, “there has been a last-minute change of topic today. We were hoping to hear from wandmakers at the next meeting...”

“Oh?” said Coaku as he shifted his cane to the other hand. “What topic is it, then?”

“The crime of claiming to be God,” explained Seyoh shortly.

“Ah, good.” Despite the last-minute change, Coaku smiled and nodded. “That’s the reason I came, actually.”

“Uh...? You came to debate this matter as well, Master Coaku?”

“Oh, no, not me. A wandmaker I know. Come in,” he said, directing the last part to someone outside the door before turning back toward the chamber. “I know this is highly unusual, but I hope you’ll forgive me. I had to give in when he gave me this condition.”

“Condition?” asked Seyoh with a puzzled look.

As they spoke, they heard footsteps approaching from outside the entrance, and a backlit person appeared behind Coaku.

It was a man with gray hair and an uncongenial look on his face. He was immature, with many years yet ahead of him.

Someone Yuui knew well.

/x...

He passed Coaku and entered the hall. Without stopping, he walked to the center.

Some of the participants must have realized he was the same man who’d gotten up at the dinner the other night.

“/x...?” said Seyoh as he rushed toward the apprentice wandmaker, his long

hair flowing behind him. “What is going on? How do you know Master Coaku...?”

“Sorry for doing this out of the blue. My name’s Ix. I’m a wandmaking apprentice. I came to Estosha to work on staffs at the monastery,” said Ix, completely ignoring everything else around him. The participants listened in utter disbelief. “I know this isn’t the kind of place someone like me should be. And I think I get what you’re all debating. It’s something theologians and clergy should be arguing over, not something a wandmaking apprentice should be sticking their nose into.”

“So why are you here, then?” asked Mellay. Then she looked around, smiled, and asked, “Well, it can’t hurt to listen, can it?”

The confusion gripping the room subsided, giving way to the feeling of a group of adults watching an excitable child. Mellay had deftly handled the crowd.

Yuui couldn’t tell if Ix noticed that change in the atmosphere or not; he just kept talking in a flat tone.

“The reason I had Coaku help me get in here to address you all is because I’ve noticed something that I can’t overlook as a believer living in the kingdom. And that...” His eyes darted to Yuui by the wall for a brief moment. “Has a lot to do with your current topic of debate. Sorry for asking this after I started talking, but I would like permission to speak. It won’t take long.”

“I see now,” said Mellay in a voice mixed with laughter. “A youngster with a straightforward sense of justice is a treasure in any generation. How about it, everyone? I feel we should give him an opportunity to speak.”

After she said that, there came murmurs of “That is fine” or “I agree.” The voices clearly resembled that of parents watching their child have a hissy fit.

Mellay nodded back in response, then signaled Seyoh with her eyes.

“Ah, well then, Ix.” With that glance, Seyoh seemed have wrested back control of the situation, as he returned to a tone even more polite than normal. “Please do speak. We would be happy to hear what you have to say.”

“I appreciate it. But I didn’t come here to speak,” announced Ix with his arms

crossed as he glared at the people around him. “I came to reveal a sin.”

“Oh, and what is that?” asked Seyoh, his head tilted.

“Misrepresenting God, of course.”

“Ah, right now we are—”

“I’m not talking about the girl standing by the wall.” This time, Ix didn’t look in Yuui’s direction. Instead, he locked his eyes on Mellay. “This misrepresentation of God is far more severe. I have come to lay it bare as a morally upright, devout believer.”

“I see. That is quite a serious charge, if true.” Seyoh nodded slightly. “Then let me ask: Who have you come to expose for misrepresenting God?”

Almost everyone in the room smiled as they waited for what was to come next.

Ix passed his gaze over their faces, then said, “Everyone here.”

5

Ix’s voice filled the chamber, and it fell silent. It was now or never.

“There is a story about the Chapel in this town. One where Rednoff, the inventor of man-made wands, stowed away in an underground room to complete the ultimate catalyst. Or so the legend goes.” Ix’s mouth kept moving as he thought through what he would say. “I get the impression it’s a famous story among people related to the Church. From where I sat at the end of the table, I even heard a few people bring it up at the dinner that night.”

He glanced at the faces of the people around him. They were staring at him with confusion, or with anger, or as though he was weird.

“The guests at the dinner came to a conclusion,” he said, looking back again to the vukodrak named Mellay. “They determined Rednoff locked himself below the Chapel because of his faith in Marayism. They arrived at this without any real proof, but that’s what was said. Am I getting that right?”



“Yes, you are correct...,” said Seyoh, creasing his brows. “Though I won’t accept that it is a claim without proof. The logic stands, and there is no proof to refute it, so we should accept it as true for the time being.”

“Does that mean you accept that is indeed the ultimate wand?” asked another man in the crowd. “Aren’t you the young man who stood up out of nowhere to ask what Mr. Rolphie meant when he said it was the ultimate wand?”

“That was because of my own lack of experience. It is absolutely the ultimate wand,” acknowledged Ix, and the man who had asked snorted. “It is. The question of how Rednoff crafted it in that time period remains, but I’m going to set that aside for now. The problem is that all of the attendees at the time, meaning everyone here now, failed to point out something crucial.”

“And what is that?” asked Mellay with a tilt of her head.

“The legend doesn’t end there. Rednoff disappeared after finishing the ultimate wand beneath the Chapel. But he didn’t just walk away. He vanished from a locked underground chamber. Not one person attempted to explain that mystery in the debate the other night. Why didn’t anyone question it?”

“Because discussing it wouldn’t accomplish anything,” countered Mellay immediately. “Legends are exaggerated and change over time. In all likelihood, someone changed ‘disappeared’ to ‘disappeared from a locked underground chamber’ somewhere down the line. It is not possible for someone to disappear from a room when they had no avenues of escape. Or are you trying to say that you can explain this?”

“Yes, I can.”

“That is an interesting claim.” She clasped her hands together on her lap. “And what is it?”

“Rednoff was a ghost.”

A few seconds after he said that, cascades of condescending laughter erupted from various places in the hall.

Ix’s expression didn’t change as he let the cackles roll off him. It wasn’t a

problem right now.

He waited for the laughter to subside before speaking again.

“Rednoff was a ghost. That is the only explanation that fits the legend. If you want to refute that claim, then provide me with proof or another possible explanation that is just as believable. That’s how these meetings work, right? Saying ‘it isn’t possible’ won’t cut it.”

“You have to verify the existence of ghosts first,” asserted a different member. “What is a ghost? What logic allows them to exist? Answer that first.”

“Dragons.”

As Ix spoke that single word, the other person’s expression turned icy.

It wasn’t just that man, either. Every person in the chamber froze.

“There is a legend about a dragon in this town. A married couple asked for a doll of theirs to be brought to life. To a dragon. It granted their wish perfectly. Once the doll expired, it become a specter that haunted the town. I imagine some of you here have heard it,” continued Ix.

“That’s a ghost story,” said Mellay sharply. “Dragons are creatures of legend. There are questions as to whether they ever actually existed. What sort of evidence is that?”

“*Dragons existed*,” asserted Ix very clearly. “Dragons existed, and they absolutely granted people’s wishes. I expect you to act like that’s true unless you have proof to the contrary.”

“.....” Seyoh glared at Ix in silence. “Fine. What is it, then, that you are claiming based on that legend?”

“That the doll in the tale is Rednoff. He was given life by a dragon. He was a doll that turned into a ghost,” said Ix without taking a breath. “That interpretation explains everything.”

He stopped speaking and looked around the room.

After checking that no one was going to offer a counterargument, he continued.

“Rednoff invented man-made wands from out of nowhere.” Ix walked slowly around the room. The flames of the candles near him wavered as he passed. “But many questions remain about how he was able to make the first wands. He didn’t develop them by synthesizing knowledge from the age of natural wands. And yet, the story goes that a single man came up with the idea for man-made wands, refined his creation to the point it was actually useable, and then even managed to craft the ultimate wand. How could he have managed that? ‘Rednoff was a genius.’ That explanation is simple, but it isn’t very convincing. But if he was a creation of a dragon, it would all add up.” Ix held his hands out in front of him. “Giving life to a wooden doll. Doing that is quite similar to how we produce man-made wands by cutting a branch from a tree and endowing it with a pseudo-life. Rednoff himself was the world’s first magic wand.”

“That’s not proof,” came the calm voice of a man. Ix looked and saw it belonged to the same man who’d sat across from him on the night of the dinner. “It’s just as convincing to say that Rednoff was an incomparable genius, and there’s as much proof for that as your claim, too. It can stand as an alternative explanation to what you just proposed.”

“But it can’t explain how he disappeared from the underground room,” retorted Ix immediately. “My explanation can cover that as well.”

“...Impossible.”

“It’s simple. After being locked in that room under the Chapel, Rednoff died. In that very chamber. He lost his life. A human leaves behind a corpse, but that didn’t happen with him.”

Ix stopped to take a breath.

“Rednoff’s consciousness became a ghost, and he left a magic wand behind.”

Maybe that was enough to get Ix’s point across. The participants should have all realized by now. If the ultimate wand was actually Rednoff’s body, then it rendered the debate at the dinner entirely pointless, or at least cast serious doubt on it.

Ix remained monotone as he finished.

“The first wandmaker was a magic wand created by a dragon.” He shot a glance at Yuui. “That is the only explanation that perfectly fits the legend’s mysteries.”

At the dinner party, the attendees had made Rednoff out to be a devout believer. They’d argued he was a craftsman who locked himself in that chamber out of his dedication to God and continued to make wands. He was spurred by faith to craft the ultimate catalyst. Hence you could argue that all wandmakers who sought that same wand were faithful members of the Church... That was the explanation they had come up with.

By that logic, the ultimate wand was nothing short of a gift created by God.

But...what if that was wrong?

What if Rednoff had been a doll, and the catalyst in the underground room was his corpse?

That would mean a dragon had created the ultimate wand.

“I came here to expose your sins. Every person who agreed with Mellay at that dinner was treating God and dragons as one and the same. Therefore, you are the sinners who misrepresented God.”

Having said that, Ix closed his eyes.

It was his only gambit.

If they denied that they’d misrepresented God, if they defended themselves and said it wasn’t true, then Ix could borrow their defense to insist that Yuui hadn’t committed a crime, either.

If they accepted their sin and said they would accept the punishment, then Ix would borrow that logic as well, though he wouldn’t believe it. He would have Yuui accept her sin and the punishment. But no matter how severe a sin misrepresenting God was, they wouldn’t agree to the death penalty, since they would have to face the same fate. That way, he could at least save her life.

This was the only way of protecting her.

Of course, his gambit wasn’t a guaranteed success. The participants could simply ignore everything Ix had said. They weren’t required to take stock in the

words of a layperson. He was hoping to rely on Coaku's name to get him that far, but it wasn't certain to work.

Ix opened his eyes again and saw Mellay right in the center of his field of vision. She was smiling unconcernedly.

Then she gave him an entirely different response than he had expected.

"You are completely right, Ix," she said, as if to agree wholeheartedly.

"Huh?" The reply slipped from his mouth.

"I am amazed you were able to glimpse such a profound truth from only the slightest of legends. I am even more convinced of the value of young people who bring new insights with each generation."

Ix couldn't understand what she was trying to say.

The rest of the meeting participants were exchanging puzzled glances; they were as clueless as he was.

Only Seyoh concurred with Mellay.

"Absolutely," he said with a strong nod. "Perhaps concealing that underground room was a mistake. I can't believe you discerned this much with just a glance."

"What are you saying...?" asked Ix.

"This is such a wonderful opportunity that I must say something. Everyone, this is a common misunderstanding even among the clergy," added Mellay slowly. "It is true that there is a legend here in Estosha about a dragon. In that tale, the dragon grants a doll life. However, past Church members have avoided speaking on this story, as it carries great risk. Do you understand why?"

Everyone in the room gave a vague nod.

"Yes, God created the world and the life in it. The Old Order teaches us that this is proof of God's existence. Which is why you could use a legend about an all-powerful, life-granting dragon to deny God. But that is only if you overlook a crucial part of the story. Seyoh, do you know what that is?"

He smiled when his name was called and said, "The dragon granted the doll

life, but not a soul. Is that correct?”

“Yes, precisely.” Mellay clapped her hands. But they gave no sound, however, as only the thick fur on her palms touched. “Why did the dragon only give life? Is it because the people in the tale asked for nothing more? No, that’s not it. Souls are inseparable from life. That is why every one of God’s creations possesses both life and a soul and why none has ever become a specter. I imagine you understand what that means. Even you, Gustavus,” she said as she looked to the other side of the room.

“I’m not sure why you’d mention my name there...,” Gustavus said. “I assume you are essentially saying that the dragon lacked the ability to make a soul.”

“Yes, that is exactly what I mean.” She nodded. “As you can tell from that, dragons and God are not the same. Dragons can create life, but only God can create souls. Dragons are mighty, but God is almighty. Which means...”

She turned back to Ix and said, “Dragons cannot create dragons. God can create dragons.”

So that was a valid interpretation?

He’d worked so hard to bring his theory together, but they’d neither refuted nor accepted it. They approached it from a whole different plane and slowly consumed it.

“Everyone,” said Mellay, “we should thank young Ix. He has shown us a hole in our interpretation and led our debate to even greater completion. It wasn’t Rednoff who created the ultimate wand—it was a dragon. And of course, it was God who birthed those creatures. And why did the ultimate wand born of a dragon choose the Chapel as its final resting place? When you think on the reason for that, I’m sure you will come to realize that the ultimate wand was indeed a blessing from God.”

She spread her arms wide as the attendees hurled fervent praise at Ix.

Ix accepted cries of “Incredible!”, “You’ve taught us much!”, and “This is what a true believer looks like!” as the Marayists swallowed his goals, his plans, his everything, whole.

He stumbled backward on unsteady feet, almost shoved by their cries.

Seyoh raised a hand, and someone quickly brought a chair over for him. They wouldn't let him leave. He was trapped within Marayism.

He sat there, dazed.

His voice wouldn't come out at all.

There was nothing else he could do.

He'd come here with the intention of saving her, but...

Ix naturally looked for Yuui by the wall, but all he saw was the wallpaper.

He panicked, trying to figure out where she had gone. Had she guessed that Ix wouldn't be able to save her and made a last-ditch attempt to escape? But that would be the worst possible choice. Maybe she'd managed to contact Nova somehow...

Just then, he heard a voice from above.

"Thank you."

"Huh?"

The petite girl was standing directly in front of him, looking down.

He couldn't see her face because it was in shadow, but he could tell she was clapping her hands.

The others quickly noticed her. The applause stopped, and commotion grew. No one understood why she would be coming forward at this moment.

"Everyone...," announced Yuui as she turned around. Ix could see only her back now. "Please forgive me, but I simply could not hold back my emotions. I was seized by the urge to tell something to you all, so I leaped forward... Seyoh, may I please be granted permission to speak?"

She looked at him, and surprisingly, he nodded immediately.

"Yes, go on," he told her.

"Thank you." She nodded once. "As you all know, people treated me as a descendent of a god in my homeland. However, that description has always felt odd to me. I never felt as if I had the blood of a deity running through my veins." Her voice was filled with emotion as she spoke. "However, now, just

now, I have become convinced of something as I listened to what this man had to say.”

She stepped forward and gestured toward Ix.

“The gods of my homeland, Lukutta, are similar to the ‘*dragons*’ of which he speaks. They are mighty, but not almighty; they cannot create their own. To be honest, I do not know if I have the blood of a deity in me, but I do know one thing: The gods of Lukutta are also creations of the true God who you all believe in.”

There was a gasp from the crowd.

Everyone turned their eyes, filled with anticipation, upon the girl who was about to be converted to their religion.

“I plan to return to my homeland after spending the winter here in Estosha. And upon my return, I hope to spread word of God to my people. I want as many of my kinsmen as possible to know the wonders of Marayism. However...I am only a child. I still know too little about this faith and, until just recently, I misrepresented myself as a descendent of God. I understand that you are unable to trust someone like me. I am sure that your concerns are greater than I can know. But my passion also burns far more brightly than you can imagine. Like the first light that Saint Anma saw...or the lava pool into which Saint Irobai fell.”

She moved to the center of the room as she implored the crowd.

“Which is why, please... I beg of you.” She bowed her head low. “Please grant me permission to spread the word of God throughout my homeland.”

It was her only remaining road to salvation.

But no one in the crowd would have suspected that from her performance. That, or they knew this and chose to ignore it. Either way, the result was the same. A woman who was a symbol in her homeland had become their missionary.

After a drawn-out silence, the hall erupted in thunderous applause.

Mellay stood and spread her arms in an attempt to draw Yuui into a hug.

The ovation didn't end; Yuui bowed over and over to the crowd.

She had been dragged to an enemy country, had her freedom and future stolen from her. And now, they had even claimed her spirit. Yet Ix saw a smile on her face.

That smile never turned toward him.

6

Yuui glanced out the window and saw a dim glow.

She imagined there must have been bonfires in the streets below. The normally quiet streets were now filled with people walking about. She could hear their voices.

Heaven's Worship had begun.

There was a bustle in the building as the meeting had only just finished, but everyone was likely to go to the Chapel soon. Yuui was relieved because it seemed like no one had seen her head back to her room.

She heard the door to the room open and turned her head to look.

"Thank you for your work, Nova," said Yuui when she saw who was there. She bowed her head. "My stay here has gotten difficult."

That was the kind of thing that Nova would always say "yes" back to, but she didn't say anything. She simply stood in the doorway, staring at Yuui.

"What's wrong?" Yuui asked.

Instead of responding, Nova walked up to Yuui. In the darkness of the room, she drew so close that she nearly ran into her. Yuui saw herself reflected in Nova's emotionless eyes.

"There's something, I don't get," said Nova quietly.

"What is that? I will explain it to you if I understand it..."

"It's about the dinner, from the other night. The group decided that Seyoh orchestrated, both the threat letter and the attack on you. He even admitted as

much.”

“He claimed it was to draw attention to me, but, well, that is quite an annoying story,” said Yuui with a shrug.

“But it, is strange.”

“Why do you say that?”

Nova blinked for a moment.

“Because, I saw the threat letter,” she continued in a flat tone. “It was an envelope that was slightly damp and mushy. The writing was running a bit, but you could still read it. If it was an act, he wouldn’t need to do something like that. He could just tell others, that a threat letter had been delivered.”

“It is somewhat perplexing...,” conceded Yuui, placing a finger on her cheek. “Seyoh is very thorough, however, so perhaps that was intentional. He wouldn’t know who might say they wanted to look at the real letter, after all.”

“Wouldn’t doing that mean he wanted to stop, the meetings? Doesn’t that motive contradict why he attacked you?”

“I thought Rolphie explained that.”

“He didn’t,” said Nova immediately. “All he did was use process of elimination, to claim that Seyoh was the only person who could have done both. He didn’t focus on the consistency of motive, at all.”

“Then perhaps we should allow for some contradiction. If there is only one possibility, we must accept it even if it is somewhat far-fetched...”

“No.” Nova shook her head and stared at Yuui. “There are two, possibilities. It could be that the person who sent the letter, and the person who attacked you, are different parties.”

“What leads you to believe there is another possibility?”

“Because I am aware of someone who knows what time the servants open the front door every day, and who could have placed a letter there immediately beforehand.”

“...And who would that be?”

Nova didn't reply. She walked over to the window and looked down.

From that small window, you had a clear view of the building's entrance. They weren't so high up that you couldn't open the window and drop an envelope at the doorstep if you aimed well.

Nova turned back to Yuui.

"Will you tell me, why?"

"Why?" Yuui tilted her head.

"You managed to get out of it, this time. Seyoh decided it was better to cover for you, than to keep others from ever knowing the culprit. But it wouldn't have gone like this, if they'd realized you actually sent the letter. You would have been tried, as a real criminal. Why would you do something so self-destructive?"

Yuui moved closer to the window. She stood beside Nova and looked down. There were so many people milling about it made you wonder where they normally were.

"Hey, Nova," said Yuui. "Why do you think I was invited to these meetings in the first place?"

"To discredit the Lukuttan faith. To make clear their attitude toward the countries they've conquered, by declaring you a sinner and executing you."

"That is very unlikely." Yuui smiled and shook her head. "If that was their goal, they could have exposed who I was my very first day at the meetings. They would have no reason to go to the trouble of forcing me to participate. I think Seyoh had only one goal in mind from the start."

"And what was that?"

"To convert me and make me a missionary in Lukutta."

Nova stared at Yuui in silence.

"The potential of converting other nations is a pressing issue in Estosha because it borders other nations. They want someone on their side who is from Lukutta, especially if they are in a position of religious power. They want it so badly, they'll do anything. The impact on the Lukuttan people will be huge when

they learn I've converted to Marayism. Obviously, my conversion doesn't need to be true in my heart. But they forced my hand into declaring my intention to convert. Now that I have said that, I have no choice but to proselytize when I return to Lukutta since the kingdom could execute me whenever they wanted. They are monitoring me, after all."

Yuui's words came smoothly.

"That is why Seyoh made me participate in those meetings, made me learn about Marayism, and made me gain the trust of the debate attendees. That was the only thing Seyoh wanted to accomplish in these winter meetings. Just as Mellay put everything into making wandmakers members of the Clergy."

"Were...", started Nova, who had been listening in silence, "were you aware of this? And still did as he wanted...?"

"I had no choice. This was the only possible outcome from the moment I came to Estosha. He'd prepared everything so thoroughly. If I tried to run, I would only be restrained even more tightly."

"But, why...?"

"There is no way I can resist them outright. But if I go along with their plans for me, the ropes binding me will loosen. In that situation, I can move at least a finger, and perhaps I can guide things just a little."

"Guide?" asked Nova, blinking a few times.

"Seyoh must have immediately clued into the fact I had sent the threat letter. He probably suspected I was trying to stop the meetings after I realized what he was up to. But he couldn't pin the blame on me because it would put more crimes on my head. And then I would no longer be just Yuui Laika, the morally upright girl descended from a god. He could have chosen to ignore the threat letter...but someone with a mind like his would actually choose to use it to his advantage."

Yuui paused to take a breath.

"He pretended to attack me and made an even greater issue out of the threats. Even if Rolphie hadn't accused him, Seyoh would have implicated himself. Either that or he would have prepared another 'culprit' to take the fall.

Regardless, his plan subsumed mine. Since he showed me his ability, I would have no choice but to go along with his plan even if I knew what it was..."

Yuui held up her palms.

"But what about it? What would the other participants in the meeting think?"

"...What, do you mean?" asked Nova.

"Wouldn't they think it was strange? 'Why would Seyoh test us?' 'Why did he lie in the beginning about the letter and the attack?' They might start to feel suspicious toward him." Yuui brought a hand to her chest. "And they might start to feel just a little bit sorry for me, because he used me. They would go easy on me. Actually, both Mellay and Gustavus spoke to me after the meeting. Those are the two I visited under the pretext of discussing that threat letter. They both promised me. They said they wanted to give me near-complete freedom in regards to the spread of Marayism in Lukutta."

Nova opened her mouth but then closed it again. She stopped blinking and stared at Yuui.

"The meetings went exactly as Seyoh planned. But at the same time, his compatriots lost a tiny bit of trust in him, and I gained some from them. And what will come of that, you ask?" Yuui held up a finger. "When the New Order seizes power, they will hold off on taking over Lukutta. So long as I am there, they will decide it will be fine to leave it alone. I will act in a way that makes them think that. And that will buy Lukutta time. Time. That can change everything."

Nova took a step back as she listened to Yuui's smooth explanation.

"I...", she started to say. "Aren't you afraid, that I'll tell the higher-ups about what you just said?"

"It would make no difference if you did," said Yuui with a smile. "But as your friend, I would warn you that I think it's unlikely you will be able to get them to take it seriously. I am merely a pawn to those above. They don't believe I have the power to change anything. Look at what happened this time—I played exactly into Seyoh's hand. I doubt they are interested in the thoughts of a puppet..."



Nova was quiet for a while. This was normal for her, though this silence seemed different than usual.

"I am, monitoring you," she said.

"Yes, you are."

"I'll likely be kept in this position, even after going back to Lukutta."

"That does seem likely."

"But, I'm going to submit a request, to be reassigned."

"Why now, of all times?" asked Yuui. "Are you fed up with me?"

"No... Because I, can't keep up with you."

"I don't think your request will be approved, though."

"...I agree." Nova nodded once, her voice the same emotionless tone as always. "Yes. I look forward, to being with you longer, Yuui."

7

Once the door to the meeting room opened, the people left, their expressions cheerful. The hall filled with the sound of chatter, which quickly grew into a ruckus.

Ix was swept along with the tide of people toward the front entrance of the building, but Shuno was waiting right beside it. Their face lit up when they saw Ix, and they pulled him by the arm to drag him into a corner of the hall. As Shuno tugged him along, several of the meeting participants tried to talk to Ix. They were all smiling. He looked for Rolphie and Hemsley in the crowd, but he didn't see them anywhere.

It didn't take long for the people to disappear. The hall quickly emptied, returning to silence.

"Everyone's going to the Chapel across the street," Shuno told him. "The attendants waiting in the hall told me. There's going to be a service in the Chapel; then everyone'll go out to the grounds for the Heaven's Worship ritual."

Anyone can join that, I guess, so do you want to wait a bit before going?”

“I don’t mind, but...,” said Ix with a sigh.

“Why’re you so down?” asked Shuno in confusion. “I was only listening through the door, but you were amazing, Ix! I can’t believe you revealed what the ultimate wand really was! Man, I had absolutely no idea. A wand made by a dragon, that’s so cool—”

“It was a lie.”

“Huh?” Shuno looked blankly at Ix.

“It was all a lie. The dragon, Rednoff, it was all just bullshit I don’t have any evidence for. Besides...that thing isn’t the ultimate wand.”

“W-wait a second, Ix.” Shuno quickly held up a hand. “A-a lie? But Munzil Alreff and his own apprentices all agreed it was. I mean, I don’t have any clue how it’s used, but—”

“That’s right, Shuno,” said Ix. “No one can use it, and there’s nothing it can be used for. That’s exactly what makes it the ultimate wand.”

“...What do you mean?”

“How many times have the two of us talked about it? Speculated about if it’s possible to forge the ultimate wand or what it would even look like if you could make it? I bet every wandmaker in history has thought the same. They dream about the ultimate wand and try to get just a little bit closer to it. That passion drives the development of catalysts, and it hasn’t died down, hundreds of years later. Even if they’re not moving forward as fast as before, even if Munzil dies... wandmakers like you will come along. Craftspeople with passion, who’ll move the ages along. And there’s probably a reason for that.”

“Stop complimenting me here,” said Shuno, a flash of anger crossing their face before they returned to normal. “So you’re saying the reason is—?”

“The ultimate wand,” said Ix with a nod. “Everyone believes that someday we’ll produce a single wand to end all wands. Because there’s a legend about the first wandmaker creating it. That’s why everyone’s so obsessed with advancing the craft. It doesn’t matter if the ultimate wand really exists or not.

Just having the name out there means that magic catalysts will continue to evolve forever. It's the same with stars. You feel safe reaching your hand out toward them 'cause you'll never reach them."

"Okay, okay, what about Rednoff, then? Where did he disappear to?"

"Not a clue." Ix shrugged. "Maybe he died in that room, and they kept it a secret, or someone secretly helped him escape... Even if we try to imagine what happened, we don't have enough information. Perhaps he felt guilty about putting all the blast wandmakers out of business and just disappeared."

"....."

After listening to Ix's explanation, Shuno turned away, frowning. They blinked several times, appearing uneasy.

"...Right," murmured Shuno after a while. "I get it, Ix. It's going to take time for you to digest it all... Got it."

"Sorry for dragging you into this."

"Not a problem at all. But I get it. That's what you meant when you said you were betraying someone, right? Saying it was the ultimate wand even when you knew it wasn't true?"

"That's..."

Ix couldn't help falling silent.

That wasn't true. Because what he'd betrayed was the honor of the dragons no longer here.

But Shuno's voice quickly turned cheerful again.

"Well, if you don't want to tell me, that's fine. At least for now, it looks like your friend was saved."

By now, Ix knew that was Shuno being nice.

He had no idea why they were so kind to him, why they were still smiling at him even though he'd gotten them into this mess. He didn't understand it, but it made him so very happy. So happy he nearly wanted to cry.

He looked at Shuno while thinking that, only to find a questioning look on

their face.

“H-hey, Ix, are you okay? Does your stomach hurt?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

“Really? You’re making an expression I’ve never seen you make before; seems like something to me.”

There was barely anyone in the hallway at this point. The service in the Chapel was probably well underway, Ix guessed.

But out of the corner of his eye, he saw two small people appear and walk toward him.

“Ah, there you two are,” said one of them.

“Oh, Master Coaku,” said Shuno, noticing them as well. “And you... Ummm, I’m sorry, I didn’t ask your name.”

“Nova,” she said with a slight tilt of her head.

“Nova? I’m Shuno. Thanks for your help before.”

“It’s, no problem.”

Ix had no idea why Coaku and Nova had come over together, but he just bowed wordlessly. Without Coaku, he never would have managed to get into that meeting.

It seemed the old craftsman had been looking for the two of them. He’d thought they would be in the Chapel and went out to search for them.

“Are you two not participating in Heaven’s Worship?” asked Coaku.

“Oh, no, we are,” said Shuno with a wave of their hand. “It’s just, we don’t know the rituals, so we were talking about going after they’re finished...right?”

Ix nodded in agreement, but hearing mention of Heaven’s Worship made him remember something.

“Coaku, sorry for the random question...,” he said, “but do you have a granddaughter?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “There was only my son. I have no

grandchildren.”

I knew it..., thought Ix as he glanced down.

Yes, there was still one thing he didn't understand.

Riess. The girl he'd first met when he came to the town, who he ran into every once in a while. The girl who he'd speculated was a real ghost.

But Coaku had told him he didn't have a daughter or granddaughter. Now what Ix had imagined up to this point was starting to feel more real...

“But I do have an assistant who's young enough to be my granddaughter,” the craftsman continued.

“Huh?”

“Come on out, Riess.”

Coaku stepped aside to reveal a little girl. She'd been hiding behind him the whole time.

She was looking at the ground and gripping the edge of her coat tightly.

“Riess...?” asked Ix, and she looked up to meet his gaze.

Her face turned so scarlet so quickly, you could almost hear a sound accompanying it. She turned around and bolted far down the hallway.

“I think that might be enough to tell you... I'm sorry. She's a very shy girl.” Coaku bowed his head while looking in the direction she had run. “She doesn't like having people look at her. She causes quite the headache for me, since she still walks around at night even though I told her not to.”

“She's shy...?” muttered Ix.

“Please don't misunderstand, though. She is really quite fond of you, Ix.”

“Huh...? I don't remember doing anything to make her like me. Did I meet her a long time ago?”

“I doubt you've met. But you have spoken with her,” said Coaku cryptically.

“...No, I don't remember at all.”

“She'd be happy to hear that,” said Coaku with a smile. “Do you remember I

sent a letter to your master some years ago?”

“Yeah. We exchanged quite a few. Master had me write them.”

“That’s correct. But I only sent the first one.”

“What about the others?”

“Riess decided to send them all by herself. She pretended to be me so she could talk to a wandmaker she admired. I bet she was disappointed when the letters came back written by a substitute whose name she didn’t even know. But she didn’t have too many people to talk to at the time. Soon, she became obsessed with sending those letters... And it seems she took quite the shine to you, Ix. I only noticed because she was enjoying herself so much.” Coaku rubbed his head. “That’s why she was so happy when she heard you were coming to Estosha. It seems like you haven’t had much chance to talk, but we’ll have many an opportunity to see each other for a long time to come, now, won’t we? Anyway, I brought her with me so she could at least say hello, but... that’s how she is.”

Ix blinked repeatedly, unable to say anything.

What did that mean?

“So what about the ghost in the monastery?” he asked.

“Ghost? What’s this about?” asked Coaku, looking puzzled.

“Uh...well, there was an incident in the monastery where someone said they saw something,” said Ix as he glanced at Shuno.

“Ah, yeah, there was. I wonder what that was,” said Shuno.

The two of them cocked their heads, and Nova slightly raised her hand.

“It was, me,” she said. Her tone was so casual that it took a while for Ix to understand.

“Now what are you saying?” asked Ix as he looked her in the eye.

“It was, me,” Nova repeated. “I visited the monastery a few times, to investigate the Old Order.”

“They don’t allow girls there,” said Ix.

“Correct.”

“...You visited? Through the underground passage?”

“Yes. It was easier to walk down there, than crossing through the snow. I received information, about the passage’s existence,” she said, her speech fragmented. “We met, at the monastery.”

“Huh? When?”

“You picked up, the book I dropped.”

“Book...?”

“It’s getting late. I should be going. Good-bye,” said Nova as she held out a hand toward Ix, who was still confused.

“Uh, yeah...,” he said as he reflexively shook her hand.

In his palm was something unlike human skin—something dry and crinkly.

He stared at Nova as she walked away. Just then, a scene replayed in his mind.

That’s right, he’d picked up a book...

The first time he went to the monastery, there’d been a monk pushing a cart. Ix had picked up a book for him.

Which meant...

The person Shuno had gotten a glimpse of in the kitchen had been Nova...

And the reason there had been one lunch too few that day was because there really *was* one too many people at the monastery.

For some reason, Ix felt the urge to burst into laughter.

Even though Yuui had just gone through what she had.

Something made the tension drain from his shoulders.

So it had been Nova the whole time...?

Right...

That’s all the ghost was, then.

EPILOGUE

Ix followed the instructions on the note he'd received when he shook Nova's hand. He entered the Chapel alone.

Service had just let out. There had been large crowds of clergy and theologians there a little while ago, but now no one was left. They were all outside, gazing at the stars.

Though nothing was lit inside the building, the moonlight streaming in from the windows was nearly dazzling in its brightness. Thin wisps of smoke rose from the candlesticks in that bluish-white glow.

Ix leaned forward, as if he were chasing the smoke.

And he saw them.

The carvings on the walls.

The paintings on the ceiling.

The stained glass.

Every single one was the product of a craftsperson.

Someone who'd devoted their entire life to a single skill.

A mark left behind by the lives of people who'd lived hundreds of years ago, whose names had fallen into obscurity.

Ix trembled, overwhelmed with emotion.

They had sought it.

They had reached out their hands, even though they knew they would never make it. They had tried to get there, if but for the briefest of moments.

To the place where their sole ideal dwelled.

They'd looked up.

At the stars.

And among those twinkling lights...

Was God.

That was proof of a craftsman.

It was how every one of them was built.

Ix looked even farther up. His tears would stream out if he didn't.

If all that was true...

Then someone who no longer sought the ultimate wand...

Who'd given up looking at the stars...

Him.

He wasn't a craftsman.

"Good evening."

Yuui called out behind him as he stared up at the ceiling.

"Don't turn around, please," she said as she stood, her back to his. "This conversation should not be happening."

"...Long time no see."

"Yes, indeed." She laughed a little, finding it funny that he would say that when they couldn't look at each other. "May I guess what you are thinking?"

Ix nodded, which Yuui felt through her back.

"Is it about wands?" she asked.

"...Yeah."

"I heard earlier. It sounds like you will become a craftsman. Congratulations."

"...I'm no craftsman." He shook his head.

"What do you mean?" Yuui was surprised; there wasn't even a hint of joy in his voice.

"I'm just not a craftsman. I thought of that wand, so I—"

"Wait," she said, cutting him off. "Before you get so down on yourself, would you mind telling me what this is about? From the beginning?"

"...Okay."

And so Ix explained the wand he'd thought up to her.

You could increase its power using a mana reaction. You'd have to limit its maximum output, but in exchange, you wouldn't need specialized skills to produce it. It would be easier to get the materials for it. You could make them in large quantities, sell them cheaply, and put one in everyone's hands. That was the wand he'd conceptualized.

It was the polar opposite of the ultimate wand—a catalyst without value.

After hearing what he had to say, Yuui remained silent for a while, staring at the floor. A number of different thoughts ran through her mind.

Eventually, she asked, "Where do you think God is?"

"God? In the sky, I guess."

"Yes, that is true with the Marayist god. But let me tell you something interesting. They say the blood of a deity runs through my veins. In Lukuttan mythology, there's a tale where a god walks among humans." Her tone turned gentle as she continued. "That deity came from the earth."

"From the earth...?"

She nodded. "The Marayists are not the only ones to speak of a god's teachings. There is a god like the stars, in a place we can never reach. But on the other hand, there is also a god who came from the ground, who interacts with people. So, Ix," she said, smiling, knowing that he couldn't see her, "that is yours alone... Your god, your wand, something that no other craftsman could reach because it came from your perspective alone. Don't you think so?"

She waited for a few seconds, listening for his wordless response through their backs, then said, "Yes, things have gotten difficult all of a sudden. But please remember this. There is a place that would welcome you with open arms. If you ever need to, come to Lukutta."

"To your country...?"

"This is far in the future, of course. You've only just become a craftsman. You'll need money and people to make the wand you just told me about. But if you ever feel you want to, please come."

Yuui was nauseated by her own dishonesty.

That future she mentioned was absolutely going to pass.

She knew it would.

When the New Order seized power, when they made wandmakers clergy, Ix would feel like his freedom was being taken from him. He would butt heads with the various rules of Marayism, and he would likely be stripped of his title.

But he wouldn't give up making wands. Yuui knew that much for certain.

When that happened, surely...

He would remember what she'd told him.

Magic wands. The craft and knowledge of those powerful weapons would come to Lukutta.

Yuui was standing on the sidelines despite knowing all this would happen. Even though she knew Mellay's plan to make craftsmen clergy.

In the town closest to God.

In its chapel.

Stood two nonbelievers.

They deceived people; they betrayed God.

The same thoughts were on their minds.

Yes...it had been only a few months since then.

That summer day, and the moment they'd met on that narrow, windswept mountain path.

They'd both had such simple, pure thoughts then. Where had they gone?

The ideals of magic wands that he'd believed in so unquestioningly.

The innocent goodness that she'd championed above her own interests.

Both were long gone...

Eventually, one of the nonbelievers disappeared into the darkness.

The other stood there motionless for a while before he suddenly raised his

head and looked toward the entrance.

He opened the door, then turned back to look once more.

He didn't find any of the sadness or dust he'd seen on that day.

He stepped outside and saw his friend among the people looking up at the stars. Nearby was a small girl. The two noticed him and smiled. They waved.

ix went to raise his hand in response but suddenly stopped to brush his shoulder. There was nothing cold there. The snow had stopped falling long ago.



Afterword

Every reader has the liberty to decide where they begin reading or where they stop reading. However, just as stories are rarely constructed with the assumption that the reader will begin reading from the end, I write this afterword with the presumption that it will be read last (there are many spoilers this time). Please keep that in mind.

As is clear from the title, *Dragon and Ceremony 3: God's Many Forms*, this book is the third volume in the series, following the first and the second. As before, the *Dragon and Ceremony* part denotes the series, while the subtitle accurately describes the content. We have gods, ghosts, and people in the running, but all those words point to essentially the same thing. It felt a bit strange writing this winter tale in the height of summer for a fall release.

Those of you who have been reading from the very beginning (not that I think anyone would only read this specific volume) will be able to tell this novel has a different feel overall. If I had to put it into one word, I would say that Volume 3 is calmer. There wasn't much in the way of skillful research or thrilling action. It was a bit more relaxed and "everyday" than its predecessors. I've been writing about wandmakers for so long, but now the characters are actually crafting them, so you could also say this is a story about work. Or maybe craftspeople? Well, there's probably no real point in making a distinction between those themes.

In terms of keywords, this book is different as well. Instead of the "inside and outside" themes from Volumes 1 and 2, we have the main theme of "above and below." Inside and outside is a separation along a plane, a frame put in place by others. If you think about stepping "outside," you've only got the three-dimensional directions to choose from. So which direction do you go in? No matter which you choose, there will be things you can see only from that point, information you can learn only from there.

Several new characters appeared in this volume, but I'd originally planned on debuting Shuno in Volume 2. There were a number of reasons why I decided to put them in this novel instead. The circumstances around their personal pronouns made some of the prose rather tricky. I got used to it by the second half, but in the beginning, I was somewhat careless with my writing, which made it a bit questionable.

Speaking of people, I originally started writing *Dragon and Ceremony* to try out writing a story in third-person narration. Now that I've made it all the way here, I finally feel like I've given that type of narration meaning (though the perspective in that last scene was just a bit of me playing around). I also feel like I've largely wrapped up the random foreshadowing I threw into the first volume, the application volume, and like I've reached a stopping point in terms of the story.

August 2020, Ichimei Tsukushi

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